

“Caution: Contamination Within”

Matthew 15:1-20

4-7-19

If you were to come to my house and open the fridge you might initially be a little taken back because there are often multiple containers labeled, “contaminated.” That can be a little unsettling if you don’t know what “contaminated” means in that context. For example, if I walk into a hospital room and I see a container that says, “Caution: Contaminated” I probably would not go digging through it without suddenly feeling like a germaphobe. Well don’t worry, the contaminated containers in my fridge will not expose you to some infectious disease. Two members of our family have celiac which means that ingesting any form of gluten creates a chemical reaction that causes internal damage to the body. What that means is that in our home, we have to be careful about any cross-contamination with foods that contain gluten. Hence, the labels in our fridge which indicate certain foods that should or should not be avoided by my son and I based on what kind of flour they contain.

Needless to say, one has to adjust to living differently in a world where something is very common poses a danger to one’s health. Well, what if this is the way things worked spiritually? What if you were spiritually clean or unclean, pure or impure, holy or unholy based on your contact with the things of the world around you. Of course, there are many things in this world that are sinful and should be avoided by believers. Things that influence the mind and heart in such a way that it makes our struggle to love God with a pure heart and a good conscience even harder.

But what if we believed that sinful contamination was only a matter of external things? Then we would live as though we could be spiritually upright by simply managing our external world. How different is that from understanding that sinful contamination is primarily a matter of one’s own heart. Now something more radical has to be addressed than mere externals.

This is the issue that Jesus is addressing in Matthew 15. The Pharisees had come to believe that maintaining certain external traditions and rituals were the means to their righteousness or cleanliness before God. But Jesus leads disciples to an essential correction: What defiles or spiritually contaminates a person is not what goes into them like certain unclean foods, but what comes out of them. That is, our struggle with sin is not just a matter of external things but the result of sin-contaminated hearts from which all of life flows.

The crux of today’s message is this:

Because our struggle with sin (and lack of holiness) is not primarily the result of external influences but rather driven by sinful desires within our own hearts, we must radically pursue a changed heart that only comes from God.

In our pursuit of a holy life, our greatest concern must not be with external things that would defile us, but rather with the internal propensity toward sin within our very own hearts.

The pharisaical tendency to measure godliness by an external list of do’s and don’ts is not merely a thing of the past. The church has gone through many cycles between struggling with legalism that measures godliness and judges others on the basis of external rules on the one hand, and blurring the boundaries of secularism and sinful license on the other. What’s important for us to understand, is that managing externals never changes the heart, but a changed heart that abandons sin to love God is able to properly discern and steward external matters in a way that please God.

Before we jump into the heart of our text in chapter 15, let me point out that the last few verses of chapter 14 set us up for this controversy. Remember, that the pharisees are ultra-sensitive to matters of ceremonial cleanliness which they have taken far beyond Old Testament requirements. The Pharisees thought it was an abomination to rub shoulders in a crowd because they never knew what ceremonial uncleanness they might attract.¹

¹ D.A. Carson, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew*, pg. 347.

So you can imagine how dismayed they were to see Jesus in the midst of the crowd that was clamoring to touch his garments so that the sick could be healed. They were more impressed with Jesus' lack of concern for being contaminated than they were for His ability to heal all who came to Him.

The Pharisees state their criticism or complaint in the form of a question in vs. 1-2. They ask, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread."

Notice that they did not say the disciples broke the law. The average Jew was not required by law to ceremonially wash their hands. The only OT requirement was for priests to wash their hands before they carried out their sacrificial duties or before they ate the sacrificial food (Ex 30:18-21; 40:30-32).² It was specific food for the priests that required ceremonial washing. However, the Scribes and Pharisees had extended ceremonial washing to apply to normal people eating normal food (appealing to the concept of Israel being a "priestly nation").³ So it is their traditions that the disciples violated, not God's law.

In vs. 3, Jesus responds to the Pharisee's criticism with a charge of His own: "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" In other words, why do you hold your traditions higher than God's word and use them to contradict God's law?

There are several ways we can respond to criticism, depending on the nature of that criticism.

- If the criticism is aimed at a matter of personal character or some need for reform in our behavior or relationships, then we would be wise to respond with **character examination**. Where might I need to grow and change in a particular aspect of my character where I may have blind spots or weaknesses.
- If the criticism is aimed at a matter of personal preference, it's wise respond with **consideration**. In matters of preference, you are free

to make a choice, but considering another person's perspective is usually wise.

- If the criticism is based on a hostility to the truth or aimed at undermining one's adherence to the truth, then the right response may be **contending for the truth**.

It's this last approach that Jesus takes in responding to the Pharisees' criticism. His character is not suspect nor is this a matter of personal preference. Jesus takes this criticism as an opportunity to contend for the truth because He knows that the very traditions that the Pharisees are defending actually war against God's law and endanger God's people.

In vs. 4-5 Jesus gives an example of how they have used their traditions to violate God's law. Notice the contrast between how vs. 4 and vs. 5 begin: "For God said...but you say." There's a clear contradiction taking place here.

God says (vs. 4), "Honor your father and mother..." This is the 5th commandment (Ex 20:12). Jesus then goes on to quote Ex 21:17: "He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death." So is this a minor offense or a major offense?

Part of honoring parents in those days was helping to provide for their needs in old age when they could no longer work. But the Pharisees had developed a tradition referred to as korban which Jesus refers to in vs. 5-6. Korban refers to making a vow that one's money is set apart for the Lord, and therefore could not be given to someone else. "Strangely, however, the regulations that governed Korban allowed a person to use their wealth for themselves during their lifetime."⁴ So they make it sound like they are honoring God by devoting their wealth to Him, but they are actually dishonoring God by violating His command to honor and care for their parents, thus invalidating the Word of God by their tradition."

Now Jesus takes it a step further in vs. 7 to not only charge them with contradicting God's word, but also being vain, hypocritical worshippers.

² R.T. France, *NICNT: The Gospel of Matthew*, pg. 577.

³ Ibid.

⁴ R.C. Sproul, *Mark*, p. 164.

[vs. 7-9] What Jesus is saying is that Isaiah's rebuke to God's people in his day, is just as applicable 700 years later because in maintaining their traditions, they have maintained the same heart attitudes that Isaiah was trying to correct in his day.

Like the people in Isaiah's day, the Pharisee believed that if they just kept their traditions and followed all of their rituals, they would maintain a level of godliness, when in fact their hearts are far from God.

There is a healthy corrective here to the danger of mere tradition. But first let me say that traditions in and of themselves are not necessarily bad. In fact, God used rituals and traditions in the OT to teach and train His people according to His ways. So traditions can be very helpful.

Yet Jesus helps us see 3 ways in which traditions can become problematic:

1. **Traditions are problematic when they are based on a false premise that violates or invalidates God's commands** (vs. 3, 6). This was the case with the korban. They developed a tradition to get around honoring or caring for their elderly parents financially and thus invalidated God's word with their tradition. *This is why we must examine scripture so carefully regarding doctrine and practice. Traditions are only as beneficial as their faithfulness to God's word.*
2. **Traditions are problematic when they are practiced without a true heart for God** (vs. 8). Even if the tradition is good and faithful to Scripture, it becomes an exercise in hypocrisy when it becomes a mere external exercise of words or behavior without a heart of love, obedience, reverence, or worship to God. This is why we must check our hearts for intentionality and not just write words when we pray for worship. *It's easy to honor God with our lips while our hearts are far from Him.*
3. **Traditions are problematic when they present man-made rules as equivalent to God's commands** (vs. 9). This is what Jesus means by "teaching as doctrines (essentials) the precepts of men." We must be careful to not add more (or less) than what scripture requires for

true godliness. It's easy to follow the Pharisees in establishing a man-made religion of human conduct that goes beyond or falls short of what the Bible actually calls for.

Notice that the common thread in these three potential problems with tradition is that external actions are emphasized at the expense of a surrendered heart to God. This brings us now to vs. 11 which is the key verse in our text and the heart of what Jesus is teaching: ***"It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man" (11).***

Keep in mind that the Jews had certain dietary laws. God had designated certain foods as unclean that were not to be eaten (Lev 11). The ceremonial law was meant to teach the people to distinguish between what is holy and unholy. Yet Jesus is clarifying that true defilement is not external based on rituals, but rather internal and moral.

The Pharisees were wrapped up in the traditions of external matters like food when their greatest danger was not what they put in their bodies, but what came out of their hearts.

The point of vs. 11 is that external matters don't determine whether one is pure or defiled, but rather what's in the heart. The relevance of vs. 11 can be bluntly stated this way: *Your greatest problem is not with sinful things around you but with the sinful heart within you.*

In vs. 12 the disciples pull Jesus aside and say, "'do you know that the Pharisees were offended' by what you said?" Jesus says in vs. 13, "Every plant which My Father did not plant shall be uprooted." In other words, Jesus offended them because He was uprooting their traditions which were a false representation of God's requirements. Of course it offended them. Jesus was taking away their illegitimate authority; authority which they wielded through their traditions not to help people honor God's word but to undermine God's word.

And so He says to His disciples in vs. 14, *"let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into*

a pit.” In essence, Jesus is telling His disciples that they should no longer regard the Pharisees as legitimate authorities because their ways are false—“don’t blindly follow them into the pit.” They are professionals at religion and ritual. Yet their hearts are actually hostile to God.

Here’s the problem: the Pharisees have centered their whole religious life around rituals void of a heart for God. The problem with ritual is that you can go through the motions with no change of heart, no forsaking of sin, no repentance before God. The danger is that a person can display the symbols of religion while holding on to his sin. This is a religion of form rather than faith, which is characterized by emptiness and hypocrisy.⁵

In the final verses of our passage, Jesus emphasizes the need for a changed heart. He reminds His disciples that food merely passes through the body but the real evil we encounter comes from the heart. [vs. 18-20] Jesus is saying, “You’re worried that what goes into your mouth will defile you? You’re real concern should be what comes *out of* your mouth as revealing of what’s in your heart!”

This is what our hearts look like apart from the cleansing power of Christ (19):

- Evil thoughts—every sin begins with evil thoughts that proceed from your heart
- Murders (6th commandment) → anger (Mt 5:21-22)
- Adulteries & fornications (7th commandment) → lust (Mt 5:28)
- Theft (8th) → coveting heart (10th commandment)
- False witness (9th commandment) → deceitful heart
- Slanders—assaulting those who are made in the very image of God

Our hearts are pervasively law-breaking!

Yet by the mercy of God, Christ came to fulfill a beautiful promise in Ezekiel 36:26: “I will give you a **new heart** and put a **new spirit** within you; and I will remove the **heart** of stone from your flesh and give you a **heart** of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.”

As we come to the Lord’s table this morning, we come to worship Christ, who through His cross, died to take the condemnation of our sin upon Himself so that when we are united to Him in faith our hearts are not only cleansed, but made new!

Faith in Jesus is what purifies the heart. Not a life of religious externals—going to church, praying, reading your bible, taking communion, helping the sick, serving the poor. Those things cannot purify, only Jesus can.

Titus 1:15—“*To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed.*”

What this verse is saying, is that no matter what you profess, or how many good works you do, if you stand outside of Christ, if He is not your home, it all flows from a heart corrupted by sin.

What are you trusting in? Your religious track record, your religious upbringing? Or are you trusting in Christ, loving Him to point of forsaking your sin?

Communion

Bread: Ps 139:23-24

Cup: Heb 10:19-23

⁵ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Commentary: Matt 8-15*, pg. 460