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Sermon Notes

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## **Tradition, Worship, and the Word of God**

### **Matthew 15:1-20**

One of the greatest issues of the human soul stands in front of us this morning: genuine WORSHIP... worship from a pure heart, worship that engulfs the souls and is a fragrant offering to the living God... true, heart-felt worship

Arrayed against this precious thing called worship are three of its greatest enemies: LEGALISM, TRADITIONALISM, AND HYPOCRISY

- LEGALISM: the belief that God accepts our worship based on how well we keep a set of rules and regulations
- TRADITIONALISM: The belief that true worship of God consists in man-made patterns of behavior passed on from generation to generation
- HYPOCRISY: acting, putting on a show for God, when our hearts are far from God

These are the issues in front of us in Matthew 15:1-20, and they are so weighty that it will take us two weeks to unravel them

Setting: Jesus has just fed 5000 men plus women and children, has walked on water, and has cured the whole region of Genneseret of all illness, healing some people who simply touched the hem of His garment

This mighty display of supernatural power was met with a delegation of religious police, of self-appointed investigators who came to observe Jesus and shut Him down if they could

These Pharisees and Scribes were there to watch Him closely in order to find fault... and they soon did when they observed He and His disciples begin eating their food without the ceremonial hand washing prescribed by their traditions

Where did this tradition come from? Who knows??!! One thousand years before this, King David asked the question concerning genuine worship”

***Psalm 24:3-4 Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? <sup>4</sup> He who has clean hands and a pure heart***

Maybe some legally minded traditionalist prescribed the handwashing based on this passage

But it was on the basis of this that they brought charges against Jesus

## I. The Legalists' Charge Against Jesus: Ceremonial Defilement

***Matthew 15:1-2 Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, <sup>2</sup> "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"***

### A. The Pharisees and Scribes: Professional Legalists

1. Great escalation of conflict with the Jewish authorities
2. A delegation from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, no doubt there to check Jesus' rising influence
3. They came to find fault, and to try to put a stop to Jesus
4. Who were the Pharisees & Scribes
  - a. Religious leaders who made the careful, meticulous study of the Law of Moses their full time business
  - b. Scribes were full time employees of the Temple and priests who copied the Law of Moses letter by letter, and who taught their interpretations of Scripture to the people
  - c. They were both legalists, people who believed God would accept them and bless them based on how well they kept the laws of God
  - d. Furthermore, they accepted a place of honor in Jewish society... openly proclaimed as the most righteous of all the Jews
5. What is the origin of their legalism?

### AFTER THE EXILE TO BABYLON

***Daniel 9:11 All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. "Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you.***

- a. When God restored a small remnant of the people to the Promised Land in the time of Cyrus the Great of Persia, they returned and dedicated themselves fully to obey the Laws of God so they would never again be evicted from the Promised Land

***Ezra 7:10 For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.***

- b. All of this was fine... but in time, the patterns of legalism and traditionalism became entrenched
  - c. Schools of religious lawyers developed who spent their full time debating this or that law, trying to nail down exactly what they were supposed to do in every case
  - d. The legal mindset grew and grew until it covered every single detail of their existence
  - e. Scribes and Pharisees arose who studied the law more carefully than anyone else and appointed themselves ethical police over the daily life actions of others
6. Deeper answer to the origin of legalism
- a. The wicked human heart wants to fix its own problems itself
  - b. We want to work out our own salvation by pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps morally
  - c. We want to pay for our sins by doing good works
  - d. We want to trade present and future obedience to rules and regulations for our past transgressions
  - e. We want to EARN our salvation by making up our own religion
  - f. Making up our own religion is as old as Cain's self-appointed offering to God
  - g. The Scribes and Pharisees made up their own religion to justify themselves

***Matthew 15:9 "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."***

**B. Their Highest Value: Conformity to Legal Tradition**

1. By the time of Jesus, there were well developed schools of Rabbis who spent their full-time teaching minutiae of the law
2. The law of God itself was deemed too complicated for any but the most trained theologian to understand
3. So they began to give additional insights, additional rules and regulations
4. Rabbis so and so, commenting on Rabbi such and such's observation on the Sabbath said this and that

5. These verbal traditions were erected like a safety fence around the Law of God, keeping a safe zone around the commands God actually gave... "If you keep the traditions of the elders, you are CERTAIN to be acceptable to God... we are going BEYOND what God requires, therefore He MUST accept you."

2<sup>nd</sup> cent. After Christ, **Rabbi Jehuda** organized the Rabbinic teachings into a book called the **Mishnah**; in time, there arose more and more traditions, disputations and statements based on the Mishnah itself. These were also collected in a work called the **Gemarah**.

The Mishnah and the Gemarah, the verbal traditions of at least twelve centuries of Jewish rabbis together make up the **Talmud**. The Talmud is the authority for Jewish life in much of the world.

6. Astonishing attitude:

- a. What we see in Matthew 15 in the accusation of Jesus against them came true concerning the Talmud
- b. Eventually the Talmud was openly put ABOVE the Scripture itself
- c. The traditions of men totally supplanted the Laws of God
- d. Listen to these statements from the Talmud:

"The Sacred Scriptures is like water, the *Mischnah* wine, and the *Gemarah* aromatic wine."  
[*Sopherim* XV, 7, fol. 13b]

"My son, give heed to the words of the scribes rather than to the words of the law."  
"He who transgresses the words of the scribes sins more gravely than the transgressors of the words of the law." [*Sanbedrin* X, 3, f.88b]

7. Astonishing that the opinions of human beings can take the place of the Perfect Word of God!!

8. Ultimate depicting of legalism:

John 5: Jesus healed a man paralyzed for 38 years, BUT He did it on the Sabbath... and the Scribes and Pharisees accused this HEALED MAN of breaking the Sabbath because he was carrying His mat

Even worse, when the Jewish leaders were conspiring to kill Jesus and had Him brought to Pilate, they wouldn't enter Pilate's house so they could eat the Passover!!

- a. Seven-fold woe from Jesus in Matthew 23

***Matthew 23:23-24 " You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.***

### C. Their Accusation of Christ: Ceremonial Defilement

***Matthew 15:2 "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"***

1. Notice the accusation: not that Christ had broken the Law of God, but that He broken the tradition of the elders
2. The issue: Ceremonial Washing
  - a. Prime example of the spirit of legalism and traditionalism in action
  - b. Law of Moses: There are some rules for priests to wash their hands before entering the Tent of Meeting; and for the elders of a town to wash their hands over a sacrifice offered concerning an unsolved murder
  - c. BUT NOWHERE is there a general command for all Jews to wash their hands for spiritual reasons before every meal
3. Don't misunderstand
  - a. This had nothing to do with germs or physical cleanliness

Germ theory was first developed by Louis Pasteur in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

- b. None of these people were thinking about germs or even knew about them
- c. This had to do with religious and ceremonial purity before God
- d. They would pour water over their hands into a basin to be in right standing with God

## II. Jesus' First Charge Against the Legalists: Arrogance Over God's Word

***Matthew 15:3-6 Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup> For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' <sup>5</sup> 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,' <sup>6</sup> he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.***

### A. A Serious Attack on the Word of God

Notice how Jesus clearly contrasts tradition with Scripture:

***For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' <sup>5</sup> But you say..."***

***God said... but you say!!!***

1. The whole system of legalism and traditionalism was a **SERIOUS ATTACK** on the Word of God
2. Legalism: Adding and Subtracting from God's Word
  - a. They add requirements that God did not give
  - b. They thus **OVERTURN** requirements that God did give
3. This case: "a gift devoted to God"...**CORBAN**
  - a. The ruling of the elders, of the rabbis concerning money or possessions devoted to God
  - b. Any money or possession designated as a "gift devoted to God" took priority over any other claim on that money or possession... including the possibility of using it to care for your parents in their old age
  - c. Thus the children did not have to honor their parents with any of their possessions if they designated everything as a "gift devoted to God"
  - d. It became a big loophole through which unscrupulous Jews no longer felt responsible to care for their parents in their old age

#### B. Fundamental Issue: Sufficiency and Clarity of Scripture

1. A legalist adds **new laws** because he feels God's laws are **insufficient** to get the job done
2. OR because he feels God's laws aren't clear enough and need human help in order to get the true point across
3. Either way, it is **ARROGANCE** toward the written word of God
4. This is why God seriously condemned adding to or taking away from His word

***Deuteronomy 4:2 Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.***

***Proverbs 30:5-6 "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. <sup>6</sup> Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.***

***Revelation 22:18-19 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. <sup>19</sup> And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.***

### C. Christ Perfectly Upholds the Law: Honor Your Father and Mother

1. As an example, Christ cites the case of the fifth of the Ten Commandments
2. The Ten Commandments in Two Tables: Vertical toward God, horizontal toward others
3. This is the first and foundational of the horizontal commandments
  - a. If a child will not learn to submit to parental authority, he/she will be rebellious all their lives
  - b. God in His wisdom set us in families to train us in submission to God-ordained authority from the very beginning
  - c. Two key words governing a child's duty to his parents
    - 1) Honor: "Honor your father and mother"
    - 2) Obey: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right"
      - d. The word "honor" means far more than grudging compliance... doing whatever they say with sullen reluctance

Honor means to give someone the first place in your mind and heart, to reverence them, to esteem them highly, to respect them; in the Scriptures it works itself out in outward ways depending on the situation:

- The King of Persia asked evil counselor Haman, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" Haman, thinking the king was speaking of him answered:

***Esther 6:7-9 "For the man the king delights to honor, <sup>8</sup> have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. <sup>9</sup> Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'"***

Now I'm not suggesting that children should put their fathers and mothers on horses and parade them through the streets proclaiming "This is what is done for parents whom we delight to honor"... but these are all examples of the way some people have honored others in the Bible

God COMMANDS children to HONOR and OBEY their parents

- e. Christ completely upholds the authority of parents over their children

- f. He even goes so far as to cite the death penalty established for rebellion against parents

***“Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.”***

So many children these days scorn their parents, roll their eyes when their parents tell them to do something, mock their parents behind their backs, etc.

The word of God does not CODDLE that rebellion that has become so prominent in our day... Jesus said rebellion against parents deserves death

4. So clearly, Christ is extremely distressed with the Scribes and Pharisees arrogant handling of the Perfect word of God

### III. Jesus’ Deeper Charge: Hypocrisy in Worship

***Matthew 15:7-9 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: <sup>8</sup> “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. <sup>9</sup> They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”***

#### A. Isaiah’s Prophecy: Exposing an Ancient Problem Still With Us Today

1. Seven centuries before Christ; Isaiah the prophet exposed the problem of hypocrisy

***Isaiah 1:11-14 “The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. <sup>12</sup> When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? <sup>13</sup> Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your evil assemblies. <sup>14</sup> Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.***

The MACHINERY OF RELIGION can mask a heart far from God

2. As in Isaiah’s day, so also in Christ’s day—with the Scribes and Pharisees
3. As in Christ’s day, so also in our day—with people playing Church on Sunday and living secretly lustful and deceptive lives the rest of the week

We live in a nation dominated by churches... every Sunday, a large percentage of the American population goes to church

There is the outward show of religion... but is it possible that our hearts are as far from God as theirs were?

## B. Hypocrisy: Acting Righteous When You're Not

The Oxford English Dictionary: **hypocrite** "One who falsely professes to be virtuously or religiously inclined; one who pretends to have feelings or beliefs of a higher order than his real ones; hence generally, a dissembler, pretender."

a simpler definition. "A hypocrite is a person who says one thing, and does another." "the practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which ones own behavior does not conform"

1. These are all fine working definitions; but the word "hypocrite" is actually a Greek word brought straight over into the English
2. The word comes from the Greek stage; actors who wore masks to play a role in a staged drama... a comedy, with a happy smile face; a tragedy with a painted mask showing intense grief... but the actor feels NONE of it
3. Some of our culture's greatest heroes are actors and actresses
  - a. We applaud their range, the wide range of roles they can play believably
  - b. Playing a president in one movie, then a homeless street person, then a Nobel prize-winning physicist, then a bloodthirsty Mongolian tribal chieftain, then an institutionalized idiot savant
  - c. Playing roles, speaking lines, displaying intense emotions... and feeling NONE of it!!
4. The Pharisees and Scribes PLAYED at being righteous
  - a. Big displays of giving to the needy, of prayer on the street corners, of fasting
  - b. Acting religious, acting righteous... BUT THEIR HEARTS WERE FAR FROM GOD
  - c. The audience was never God... it was always other people

***Matthew 23:5-7 Everything they do is done for men to see: ... they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'***

***John 5:44 How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?***

5. So rituals like handwashing were vital for the show... so also was judging other people who didn't measure up to their levels of behavior

### C. Hypocrisy in Worship: Acting Reverent When You're Not

1. The essence of true worship is Godward awe and wonder
2. God reveals Himself, we respond with heart-felt awe, wonder, reverence
3. **A heart aflame with the glory of God... a mind captivated by His nature: His power, His knowledge, His compassion, His righteousness, His holiness, His achievements in history, His promises for the future**
4. A hypocrite feels NONE of this... there is a major disconnect between outward show and inward passion

## IV. True Worship Versus Traditionalism

*Matthew 15:7-9 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: <sup>8</sup> "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. <sup>9</sup> They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."*

### A. What Is Traditionalism?

#### 1. Jaroslav Pelikan

Jaroslav Pelikan on a vital distinction: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

#### 2. Trying to Capture the Spirit in a Human Response

Illus.: One church, "Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart" was sung and a powerful revival broke out; the word of God had been faithfully preached and hearts were ready for the Spirit to move; the hymn was played, and many began to weep and repent and turn to the Lord... it was a revival worked by the Spirit of God, but it just so happened to occur while that hymn was being played. Well, for the next half-century, every single worship service at that church ended with the song "Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart" being played

One of the most courageous worship pastors in recent history finally led the church to new ground simply by not playing that hymn one Sunday

- a. The Spirit moves in a powerful way
- b. People respond spontaneously by singing this song or praying this prayer, or doing this action... all of it (at that moment) led by the Spirit
- c. After the fact, people try to recapture the moment by remembering the human responses and re-enacting them again
- d. Only the next time, perhaps, the Spirit isn't in it at all... now it's become a merely human rule

### 3. Imposing that Capture as a Rule for Future Generations to Follow

- a. What follows is traditionalism
- b. The outward, human rituals and actions and ceremonies are captured for all time and established by human rules and regulations
- c. If you want to have a revival, this is how to do it
- d. If you want to be holy and pure, wash your hands three times in the prescribed way; bow three times toward Jerusalem and pray this specific prayer
- e. If you want to be pleasing to God, fast three times weekly, give a tenth of all you possess, go to morning and evening prayer, etc.
- f. These are the “traditions of the fathers”, and they are a poor substitute for true spiritual worship

### B. The Essential Place of Tradition

1. Modern era: delight in what’s new and unusual, strong disconnect from history
2. “Old School” vs. “New School”
  - a. Lists in USA Today: “Hot” vs. “Not”
  - b. Wal-Mart: retailing giant, with 3811 stores nationwide, gives new products a matter of days to make their mark on their shelves
  - c. Pop culture trends last barely enough to notice them... the “hottest” pop group last year has been replaced by a new one this year
3. Cutting edge technology
  - a. Post-industrial revolution... things moving extremely rapidly
  - b. Especially in electronics and computer technology, things become obsolete extremely quickly
  - c. Even print media like magazines are too slow to keep up; Frankly, even standard websites are too slow to keep up
  - d. Only blogs seem to be responsive enough to track some of the changes that are happening as quick as lightning
4. Churches afraid of becoming “irrelevant”... or “left behind”
  - a. Abandon things very quickly lest they become stale

- b. Keep Americans with a very short attention span interested by a constant stream of new spiritual experiences
  - c. Sights, sounds, colors, experiences... all of it with a feel of “brand new”
  - d. Connection to 2000 years of church history and of brothers and sisters in Christ from ages past is seen to be undesirable to this mentality
5. BUT tradition is actually VITAL to our faith if it is tied directly to the Scripture and the truth of God

***1 Corinthians 15:1-4 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures***

“Passed on” is same Greek root as the word translated “tradition”

There are certain traditions of doctrine and practice that are essential to our faith, stemming directly from the apostolic teaching of the gospel

- 6. AND knowing past traditions helps us learn timeless lessons about the application of biblical truth to every generation and every culture
- 7. Summary: Tradition is VITAL to our faith... we are not reinventing Christianity every generation
- 8. BUT traditionalism is DEATH to our faith... for it prevents the Holy Spirit from applying unchanging spiritual truths to our accelerating world

#### C. What Is True Worship? Three Key Observations

##### **1. Not man-made, but initiated by God**

- a. Key concept: **revelation, then response**

***Matthew 16:15-17 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.***

##### **2. Not based on human rules, but based on the Word of God**

- a. The foundation of true worship is God’s self-revelation
- b. He has revealed Himself most clearly in His Word
- c. Therefore the Word of God ministered directly to the human heart by the Spirit of God is the foundation of all true worship

### **3. Not hypocritical, but from a heart drawn close to God**

***Matthew 15:8 "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.***

True worship is a heart drawn CLOSE to God

- a. Awe, reverence, fear, wonder, amazement, feeling, tears, shouts of joy, exultation, surprise, shock, astonishment... these experiences and many others are consistently at the center of TRUE WORSHIP
- b. Thus true worship is HEART-FELT genuine response to what God has revealed
- c. It is not an act, not hypocrisy... it's what you TRULY FEEL inside yourself, what you TRULY THINK about God and how you LOVE Him based on that

## V. Application

- A. KEY QUESTION: AM I ACTING or is my heart genuinely right with God??
- B. Non-Christian: true worship begins at the CROSS of Christ
- C. Christian: am I merely going through the motions?
  1. Children act at being grownups by playing dress-ups... putting on grown-up clothes... it doesn't change who they are
  2. Drama clubs act when they put on a play
  3. Diplomats have to do a ton of acting when they are negotiating a vital treaty with a foreign diplomat
  4. Spies have to act out a convincing role to set their enemies at ease and gain valuable information from them... they have to be utterly convincing in their cover as a factory worker or dockworker or importer or teacher
  5. Politicians act much of the time they're on the campaign trail... smiling constantly, shaking hands warmly with total strangers, kissing babies
  6. The ACADEMY AWARDS are coming up to name the best actors and actresses in various roles in motion picture industry
  7. That's all well and good... but it is DEADLY when it comes to worship
    - a. If our hearts are far from God, it will show by what we do in our private lives

- b. It will show by what we talk about, but what animates our faces and energizes our lives
- c. It will show when we can't sing worship songs or listen to sermons with anything more than patient tolerance
- d. BUT EVEN THERE, hypocrisy can rear its head
- e. Some are good enough actors and actresses to carry on a fine performance week after week at church

8. If it was a problem for them it can be a problem for us

9. Be willing to follow the Spirit where He leads, knowing He will never lead contrary to the word of God

10. Be willing to let go of old forms that no longer effectively minister the word of God

11. Be unwilling to let go of old truths that are still true and always will be true

12. Watch out for legalistic rules and regulations about worship,

13. BUT watch out just as much for the restlessness and rootlessness of our present age which thirsts constantly for something new

#### D. Worship God in Spirit and Truth

1. The heart of this passage is worship that is true, not hypocritical

2. Ask the Lord to search your heart and see if honor Him with your lips but your heart is far from Him

3. Ask Him to uncover secret sin in your life that makes your worship hypocritical

#### E. Resist the Temptation to Judge Others

#### F. Next Week: How Can the Heart be Made Pure?