

**The Cause of Defilement**  
**Matthew 15:10-20**  
**Gerry Andersen**  
**Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School**

The first half of Matthew 15 centers around the issue of defilement. In Matthew 14:36, Jesus allowed strangers to touch His cloak in order to become healed. The Pharisees would never have allowed this out of concern that such touching could potentially render themselves unclean. Jesus did not become unclean by touching people, even a leper, who rather became clean through Jesus' touch (Matthew 8:1-4). This misunderstanding of what renders someone unclean was central to what was wrong with the teaching of the Pharisees and scribes, which Jesus addressed in Matthew 15.

**Jesus clarifies defilement (15:10-11)**

In Matthew 15:1-9, Jesus did not specifically address the attacking question about the disciples' behavior of not washing their hands when eating bread in accordance with the oral tradition of the Pharisees. He rather countered their charge by identifying their failure to obey the commandment to honor their father and mother and invalidating the word of God by their teaching. However, in Matthew 15:1-20, Jesus addressed the question of defilement directly and also publicly by calling the crowds to Himself.

Jesus began His words to the crowd with two imperatives, "*hear and understand.*" He emphasized the requirement for those listening to His words to go beyond hearing and actually comprehend what He is saying. The reason for these commands becomes obvious when His own disciples required a further explanation in verse 15.

The simple principled truth that answers the Pharisees question from verse 2 about why the disciples of Jesus do not wash their hands before they eat bread is that, "*it is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.*" While these words seem very straightforward and understandable today, it is clear that they were not as easily grasped by His disciples. The disciples needed further instruction from Jesus to the extent of these blunt words from Matthew 15:16-20. Yet the disciples continued to fail to grasp the full meaning of what Jesus meant well into their ministry in the early church (cf. Acts 10-11).

## **The Pharisees' concern the disciples (15:12-14)**

We learn from Mark 7:17 that the disciples engaged Jesus after they left the crowd and entered a house, yet only Matthew recorded the offense felt by the Pharisees and this condemnation by Jesus. This offense was certainly more of a concern for the disciples than it is for Jesus. Since there was some time that lapsed between Jesus' words to the crowd and the disciples' question to Jesus, they must have learned of the Pharisees' offense during this intervening period.

In contrast to the disciples' lack of understanding of these words of Jesus, the Pharisees grasped them enough to become offended at what He said. The reason they were offended was not just because their understanding of the Law as interpreted by them was rejected by Jesus, but because He did not publicly support their teaching in front of the crowds. They took His words personally, for it served to undermine their authority. The popularity of Jesus was already diminishing their influence over the Jews and now their teaching was not supported by Him.

The disciples viewed the offense of the Pharisees as concerning. Therefore, they continued to view the dignitaries from Jerusalem with some level of high respect, in spite of the opposition of the Pharisees to Jesus and in spite of such strong words from Jesus about them in the Sermon on the Mount, *"For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 5:20).

Jesus responded to the disciples by using a couple of analogies. The analogy from the plant describes a plant that God did not plant that would be uprooted. The Old Testament portrays Israel as God's plant, *"Then all your people will be righteous; They will possess the land forever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, that I may be glorified"* (Isaiah 60:21) and *"So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified"* (Isaiah 61:3). The blessed man *"will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers"* (Psalm 1:3).

Furthermore, the analogy of uprooting worthless plants is also an Old Testament image, *"What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground"* (Isaiah 5:4-5).

Also, John the Baptist had used the image of the destruction of a plant when he addressed the Pharisees who had come to him for baptism, *“the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”* (Matthew 3:10). Therefore, the plant that was uprooted because it was not planted by God would be familiar to the disciples, possibly even in the context of the ministry of John regarding the Pharisees.

Obviously, Jesus meant that the Pharisees were the plant that was not planted by God and will be uprooted. Later, Jesus would restate the truth of the illegitimacy of their leadership of the Jews, *“the scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses”* (Matthew 23:2). Their position as the Jewish religious leaders was not from God, but rather was from their own making. The Lord will remove them from their place because He had not appointed them. They were worthless as spiritual leaders.

The second image used by Jesus in His reply to the disciples was of a blind guide. Later manuscripts add that these were blind guides “of the blind” (KJV, NASB), but this is unlikely to be in the original text. We see from Paul’s letter to the Romans that some Jews considered themselves to be a spiritual guide for the spiritually blind, *“But if you bear the name ‘Jew’ and rely upon the Law and boast in God, and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?”* (Romans 2:17-21). Certainly, the Pharisees would view themselves as the spiritual guides to the Jewish people.

If a blind man is guided by a blind guide, then *“both will fall into a pit.”* The blind man would trust someone who was incapable of leading them and would be in jeopardy. The blind guide would also be in danger by thinking that he was able to guide others. If the blind guide recognized his limitations, he would not have tried to guide anyone but would have realized his need for guidance for himself.

Because of their arrogance, the Pharisees were placing both themselves and their followers in great danger. They had the Old Testament and the spiritual leadership over the Jews, but they clearly did not understand the word of God and therefore failed the people who they were leading. Because they did not understand the word of God, they did not receive Jesus and follow Him. Jesus spoke this to the Pharisees in John 5:39-40, *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.”*

Jesus commanded His disciples to “*leave them alone.*” This is particularly instructive to us today. We should not engage modern-day Pharisees who elevate their opinions to the place of the word of God. Even Jesus Himself did not seek them out but engaged the Pharisees and scribes when they came to Him. The apostles likewise did not seek out confrontation with these religious leaders. When legalistic people are addressed as such, they respond by attacking. “*Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces*” (Matthew 7:6). Rather than to seek out arguments, we ought to humbly teach the word of God, trusting the Holy Spirit to use His word to enlighten the souls of many.

### **Jesus corrects the disciples (15:15-20)**

While Peter asked Jesus to “*explain the parable to us,*” he was only the spokesman for the rest of the disciples. Jesus replied by addressing the disciples as a group by using the plural to address them all. By parable, Peter meant the metaphorical comparison of the mouth from Matthew 15:11. We can discern this is what Peter intended, as opposed to the imagery of the uprooted plant and blind guide, because of Jesus’ response in Matthew 15:16-20. Jesus explained how true defilement happens based upon His words from verse eleven.

The meaning of statements by Jesus were not obvious to His disciples, but at least they sought clarification. Jesus expected the disciples to understand His words and considered them lacking for their failure. Thus the word “still” was used by Jesus to intensify their lack of understanding. Jesus had been concerned with their understanding prior to this teaching (Matthew 13:51; 15:10), because hearing and understanding is essential to spiritual life and growth.

Jesus then contrasted the material (food) with the immaterial (words). The reason “*it is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man*” (Matthew 15:11) is because what goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is eliminated. Eliminated literally means, “cast into a latrine.” Regardless of whether food is considered “clean” or “unclean,” it all is disposed of by the body, with no lasting effect.

The reason “*what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man*” is because what comes out of the mouth is sourced in the heart. The heart is a metaphor for the core of our being, our intentions, desires and will. Ultimately, our desires will be manifested, “*For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart*” (Matthew 12:34).

Jesus made it clear that His words were not limited to only food and words in Matthew 15:19-20, *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.”* It is not simply our words that proceed from our mouth that defile us, but also our thoughts and our actions. Each of the sins in this list are plural, indicating the voluminous variety of them.

This list in verse 19 follows the order of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13-17; Deuteronomy 5:17-21), from murder to false witness. None of the crowd, even the Pharisees, would have disagreed that *“murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness”* would defile someone. However, this list is not limited to only the Ten Commandments. The commandments are bracketed by *“evil thoughts”* and *“slander.”*

The concept that evil thoughts, or any thought that does not correspond to the revealed will of God, violate the will of God is not new. Jesus addressed the evil thoughts of anger and lust, which underlie murder and adultery, in Matthew 5:21-28. Jesus would later say that inside the scribes and Pharisees, they were *“full of robbery and self-indulgence.”* He spoke to the scribes, *“why are you thinking evil in your hearts?”* in Matthew 9:4. He knew the heart of man is evil, *“The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”* He prefaced His teaching about God with the evil nature of man in Matthew 7:11, *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!”*

We cannot be undefiled by merely controlling our behavior. While it is certainly better that we refrain from acting upon our evil thoughts, we do not avoid sinfulness by ending certain practices. This is why ministry approaches that seek to reform evil behaviors are inadequate. Reformation can help people temporarily, but not eternally, for true repentance comes from the heart.

Jesus concluded with slander, which comes from the mouth, and restated the ninth commandment, *“you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”* Slander is a false statement made in defamation of another person. This is a reference to the scribes and Pharisees in relation to their blasphemy against Jesus. The very people who were so concerned with defilement by eating bread with unwashed hands (Matthew 15:2), were themselves guilty of the very things that truly cause defilement. This slander came from their heart, which was turned against Jesus.

Mark's account of these words of Jesus is more extensive than Matthew's Gospel, *"For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man"* (Mark 7:21-23). Mark also omits Jesus' summary words, *"but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man"* (Matthew 15:20). This also shows how Matthew has focused upon the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders, while Mark is reporting more generally.

Mark's Gospel also adds the parenthetical clarifier *"thus He declared all foods clean"* to these words of Jesus (Mark 7:19; cf. Matthew 15:17). Mark is again broadening the meaningfulness of this teaching of Jesus to the Gentile audience to whom he writes. This teaching of Jesus that all foods were clean would need to be revisited in the early church (Acts 10-11) and in the epistles of Paul (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8-10).

Jesus did more in this text than oppose the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees. He had already exposed their sinfulness of not honoring mother or father and thus invalidating the word of God, repudiating the teaching of their traditions as the doctrine of God (Matthew 15:3-9). They had failed as the representatives of God's word to the nation, as Jesus pointed out by His repeated words to them, *"have you not read"* (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31).

Jesus Himself was the final authority over the true interpretation of the word of God, as He taught in Matthew 5:21-48. He alone is the fulfillment of the Law, which presupposes His full understanding of the Law (Matthew 5:17). Because He was from above (John 8:31), He is the Lord over the revelation of God to man.

By rejecting the authority of the religious leaders to understand and interpret the Old Testament and its requirement, and by claiming this authority for Himself, Jesus precipitated the opposition that would lead to the crucifixion. This was in concert with the Old Testament prophecies of the rejected Messiah who will deliver us from sin. *"He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed"* (Isaiah 53:3-5). God used the evil of the corrupt religious leaders to deliver His people into the kingdom of heaven.

## Conclusion

Matthew 15:10-20 drives the conclusion of why the scribes and Pharisees were wrong in their view of their tradition and that *“to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.”* This teaching of the precepts of man as being the doctrine of God invalidated the Scripture by replacing it with human traditions.

Their human traditions misunderstood the cause of sin. This basic premise of this section of Matthew is that sin comes from us rather than sin coming to us. What we think, say, and do is what falls short of the glory of God. Nevertheless, this principle continues to baffle Christians today, for the very reason that the traditions of man’s opinions have taken precedence over the word of God. The means by which we honor the Lord in accordance with His will is to teach the word of God, which has much to say about the offspring of the Pharisees today. We must *“beware...of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees”* (Matthew 16:12).

All churches have traditions and practices. These traditions only become a problem when such traditions are considered to be from biblical principles that then carry the authority of the word of God. When people teach what is beyond the Scripture as authoritative, the end result is always some form of external conformity to some man-made standard of behavior.

We must teach about the centrality of the heart and against the danger of external religion (Matthew 15:15-20). External religious traditions of behavior that are taught as the essence of righteousness only serve to exalt those who espouse them. We ought not proudly exalt ourselves in our position or ability, but humbly serve all men, without distinction.

The teaching of Jesus is focused on the heart of man, for the greatest commandment is *“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart”* (Matthew 22:37). We are not defiled by what we eat or drink, *“whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God”* (1 Corinthians 10:31). Rather we are defiled by what comes from within us.

This was the problem with the religious leaders, as Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13 regarding the scribes and Pharisees, *“this people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.”* Later Jesus emphasized this in Matthew 23:26-27, *“You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.”*

Since the heart is the source of all evil, from our thoughts to our words and actions, the remedy is found in the Lord giving us a new heart. In the words of God of the new covenant in Ezekiel 36:26-27, *“moreover, 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. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.”* The Lord has given us the Holy Spirit and *“made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”* (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Since who a man actually is determines what he says and does, there is no amount of external pressure to conform that can bring true, lasting change. It is only by God’s grace that we become righteous. *“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). Therefore, this has great relevance for both our own growth in holiness and how ministry should be ought to be conducted.