

Matthew 15:1-20 | “The Root Issue: The Heart”
Preached on October 29, 2023 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew 15, verse 1.

We have been working through the book of Matthew, learning about discipleship, and this passage is key to understanding genuine discipleship.

Let's READ the passage to start out. [*READ*]

Recently, my bathroom sink had a leak.

It was leaking underneath the sink, and so I looked around and saw water dripping off of the water supply line. [*pause*]

Now the water supply line was older and the water was dripping off of it, so I thought, “Oh, it's probably the supply line, so I'll just replace it, and all will be well.” [*pause*]

I did that, turned the water back on, and it was still leaking underneath. [*pause*]

I scratched my head a little bit, and then determined to look more intently.

I had to look further in, take a closer look, think more, and what I discovered was that the source of the leak was from the faucet itself. [*pause*]

The faucet had some sort of crack inside of it and so water was running down the water supply line from the faucet. [*pause*]

I had found the source of the leak, and it took some thinking and investigating to get to the root cause. [*pauseeee*]

I find that we are like that when it comes to our lives.

We so often focus on the surface level issues without getting to the root of the problem.

Like replacing the water supply line, we tackle the symptoms, but not the core issue of the matter.

We don't focus on the root cause, and then the water just keeps running down because all we did was cover up the symptoms. [*pause*]

So what will it take?

Like I did, we need to go further in, take a closer look at our lives, do some thinking, and discover the root cause. [*pauseeee*]

Now this focus on surface-level symptoms is not something that only we do, but it is pervasive throughout humanity.

It is mankind's natural tendency to obsess over the outward, and neglect the inward. *[pause]*

Like a man who thinks that merely stopping his arm from bleeding will solve the massive open wound on his arm, so as fallen humans, we focus on surface-level solutions to root problems. *[pause]*

We see this all the time...

Think about the solutions put forward to issues that we face. *[pause]*

We think that just taking all of the french fries out of our house will cause us to stop eating french fries, but what happens?

You are driving, see McDonalds, and go right through the drive-thru, ordering a large fry.

Why?

Because the issue wasn't the fries, the issue was your lack of self-control. *[pause]*

Or think about the problem of murder and violence in society.

The problem isn't the tools they use to murder, the problem is a heart problem that leads to murder. *[pause]*

You see, our society thinks that our biggest problems are *outside of us*.

But what is that doing?

You are focusing on the surface-level and not going down deep into the root cause. *[pause]*

They think, "If only that guy lived in a better situation, had a better community, had better healthcare, had more support, had more governmental programs available to him, then he wouldn't have done such a heinous crime." *[pause]*

Now certainly our environment and situation can influence us, tempt us, or make things harder, but ultimately the root issue is inside of us. *[pauseeee]*

True change will only happen when hearts are truly changed. *[pauseeee]*

As you can see, we often focus on the symptoms in our own lives, and not the root.

Society does it, and really, this isn't something new, for what we find in this passage is that the scribes and Pharisees did the same thing. *[pauseeee]*

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were prime examples of being outward-focused. *[pause]*

Here in this passage, Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees "hypocrites" in verse 7. *[pause]*

You see, this word 'hypocrite' really meant to be an actor or pretender.

Like an actor pretends to be someone else, so hypocrites act like they are godly on the outside, but inwardly, they are not godly at all. *[pause]*

So a point that I would like you to see in this text is that...

I. Hypocrisy shows a heart problem.

Anytime that someone is a hypocrite it's because there is a heart issue going on.

Their heart and actions are not in the same place. *[pause]*

Consider what the scribes and Pharisees show us here.

The scribes and Pharisees, who would be the top religious leaders of the day, confront Jesus about his disciples not washing their hands before they eat. *[pause]*

Now this isn't because they are concerned about germs, but rather, it's a ritual purity thing.

Ritual hand washing was prescribed for the priests before they carried out their responsibilities at the altar,¹ but this handwashing was never required of the typical Israelite. *[pause]*

So what happened was that the Israelite religious leaders made up this new rule, and acted like it was on the level of God's Word. *[pause]*

That's why the religious leaders are so upset, and say, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?"

And I just love Jesus' response, for he says in verse 3, "And why do you break the *commandment of God* for the sake of your tradition?" *[pause]*

Do you see what He's saying?

They are mad because the disciples break the elders' tradition, but Jesus points out that they break God's commandment for the sake of tradition. *[pause]*

The scribes and Pharisees were trying to hold others up to man-made laws, but Jesus held them up to God's law. *[pauseeee]*

This is because hypocrisy often holds others up to man-made rules. *[pauseeee]*

How may this be seen today?

Well there are certain things that God says about our dress, but there are other things that people try to proclaim as truth that are man-made. *[pause]*

¹ See Exodus 30:18-20.

I've heard of people holding others to a certain standard of hair length, for if a man's hair touched his collar, that was almost seen as breaking God's law. *[pause]*

What about education choice? What about a certain order of service?

We can definitely look to the Word for principles to guide us, but we are on dangerous ground when we act like our man-made ideas are God's truth. *[pauseeee]*

Any time that you think or say, "A true Christian doesn't do blank," or, "A true Christian does this," then you better make sure that it aligns up with God's Word.

Because Jesus is showing us that it is a very big deal, and actually shows an errant heart when we "[teach] as doctrines the commandments of men." *[pauseeee]*

May we as individuals and a church never "go beyond what is written."² *[pauseeee]*

I want you to think about what's so wrong about emphasizing human tradition.

Well the problem is that by lifting up human tradition, you lower God's Word. *[pause]*

Doing this demonstrates a person who actually devalues God's Word, and therefore, they are devaluing God.

They want to be the authority, instead of letting God be the authority.

So to battle this, we must always go back to this foundational truth: the Word of God always trumps human tradition. *[pause]*

I don't care what human tradition it is: if it is not Biblical, it is not binding. *[pauseeeee]*

Traditions can be so deceiving because they look so holy, but in reality, if tradition causes you to disobey God's Word, it is *wicked*. *[pause]*

We don't often think of human traditions that way, yet Jesus makes it clear the sinfulness of what they were doing by elevating their tradition so highly. *[pause]*

He says that their tradition actually caused people to break God's commandment, and therefore, their tradition "made void the Word of God". *[pause]*

He's saying that they had actually nullified, legally invalidated the Word of God by their own rules. *[pauseeee]*

What would happen is that they made up this oath that someone could do, whereby they would dedicate their money or property to the Lord, and once they died, it would go to the Lord. *[pause]*

² 1 Corinthians 4:6.

That all sounds so good and righteous, but the problem was that people were doing this and then not caring for their parents. *[pause]*

Let's say someone didn't want to care for their older parents, all they had to do was vow everything away that would have helped their parents.

So in one sense, they are making it look like they are such a godly person, who would promise their resources to God, yet they were disobeying the command to honor their parents.

Their tradition actually voided the Word of God. *[pauseeee]*

Now of course, we don't do that specific thing, but are there modern day examples?

I know of a teenager who came one Sunday to a church and he was wearing kind of common, everyday clothes.

And a person actually approached that teenager and scolded him for not wearing a suit and tie. *[pause]*

Well here the teenager came from a poor family, and he shared that he didn't have the money to afford a suit. *[pause]*

That is so sad!

Instead of being thankful that this teen was actually *in* church, this other person was unloving to someone who couldn't afford much.

Their tradition of dress trumped the Word of God to love and care for others. *[pause]*

This is what hypocrisy often does, it focuses on the small things, and neglects the big important things.

Like Jesus says elsewhere about how they neglect the weightier matters of the law, "straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!"³ *[pauseeee]*

One commentator shared this story of how he has seen it happen.

He says, "In a church I know well, a deacon I respect in most other matters rebuked a person for wearing work clothes to church (even though she had just gotten off work);...

...[yet] another leader in the same church had gone unrebuked for sleeping with a woman to whom he was not married."⁴ *[pauseeee]*

That's when you know that your tradition has trumped God's Word. *[pauseeee]*

³ Matthew 23:23-24.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, vol. 1, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Mt 15:15-20.

Just think of the scribes and Pharisees here.

They were nitpicking the disciples' behavior of not washing hands, yet all the while, they were allowing people to disobey God's law.

That's because hypocrisy focuses on other people's issues, while neglecting its own.

It focuses on the external only, rather than caring about the heart. *[pauseeee]*

In what way are we hypocrites?

Remember that hypocrisy shows something wrong with our hearts.

It's all a show, with no heart. *[pause]*

Are there any traditions that you have raised to the level of God's Word, and you hold others up to it?

Are you nitpicky with others, yet blind to your own sin?

Do you only care about the outward, to the neglect of your heart? *[pause]*

Some of us may be spiritual actors, religious pretenders, church performers.

This ought not to be!

If we do that, we show that there's a heart problem going on.

So let's do a heart check, where are you at? *[pause]*

Let's not just look outwardly, and think, "Well I look OK to others."

But let's care about where our heart is at, and be willing to say to others, "I'm not doing well, but I want to grow."

For the thing is, we may be able to fool others with our acting, but God sees through our acting skills, no matter how good of an actor you are. *[pause]*

That's what we see next...

II. Our heart problems aren't hidden from the Lord.

Remember what would happen at the end of the cartoon TV show, "Scooby-Doo"?

They would unmask the villain to reveal who the real person was, and usually it was shocking because it was someone they didn't expect. *[pause]*

Well we must understand that the Lord never has to unmask us at the end of our lives to find out who we really are, but He knows all along.

You cannot fool God Almighty. *[pauseee]*

Notice how in this passage Jesus takes aim at the religious leaders and reveals their true character. *[pause]*

They fooled the people, but they didn't fool Him.

He calls them hypocrites, and explains how they made void the Word of God.

And then He even tells them that Isaiah prophesied of them, saying in verses 8-9...

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” *[pauseee]*

These people performed mere lip service to the Lord, but their hearts weren't in it.

They may have said all the right things, but their hearts were far from God. *[pause]*

Their lips and their hearts weren't inches away from each other, but worlds apart.

They conducted all of this worship, but the truth is, Jesus says this worship was in vain.

It couldn't truly be called worship, but it was worthless worship.

All of the effort they put into putting on a show did no good, but was pointless. *[pauseee]*

We can be guilty of the same sort of thing, can't we?

We can think, “Well I said all the right things!” yet our hearts are far from the Lord.

It's like the kid who says, “Sorry,” because they have to in a perfunctory way, but their heart isn't into it at all. *[pauseee]*

Let's tear down any idea that we can worship God rightly when our hearts aren't into it.

It's all in vain!

Just because you come to church every so often doesn't make you a godly person.

Christianity is not a checklist thing, where as long as you check the things off the list, you are good.

You may put on a show, go through the motions, and fool others, but God is not caught unaware, for He knows.

He wants our lips and our heart to match; our actions and our motives to align. *[pauseeee]*

We must remember that God *detests* empty worship.

Dead ceremonialism is not pleasing to Him.

It looks so holy, so religious, so godly, but it's empty, it's vain, it's hypocrisy - and God knows it.
[pauseeeee]

In fact, just think about how Jesus portrays these religious leaders.

He has called them hypocrites, and called them out for having vain worship, making void the Word of God, and having their hearts far from the Lord.

But it doesn't stop there, does it?

In verses 12-14, the disciples are like, "Uh, Jesus, the Pharisees are offended."

But notice how Jesus doesn't care, for He isn't impressed by them.

Rather, He tells the disciples what the Pharisees' true nature is: they are blind. [pause]

They act like they know so much, but they don't.

In fact, they are the blind leading the blind, and they will both fall into the pit.

They only lead people to destruction.

And He says they will be uprooted, for the Father didn't plant them.

They are like the weeds, which are growing along with the wheat, and they will face judgment.⁵

So the disciples shouldn't be concerned about them being offended. [pauseeeeeee]

Our heart problems are not hidden from the Lord.

Do you realize that?

I don't know why we act like we can hide it from God, for He knows the true state of our hearts.
[pause]

This truth should lead us to be genuine, authentic people.

People who don't seek to put on shows in front of others, but who seek to be real. [pause]

We don't try to go through the motions of religiosity, thinking that that will gain us something, but we genuinely follow the Lord. [pause]

We do this, knowing that...

III. Our hearts are what matter.

⁵ See Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.

Jesus says in verse 11, “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” *[pause]*

When the disciples ask Jesus to explain this saying, He makes it more clear for us.

Look at verses 17-18, “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.” *[pauseeee]*

The Pharisees thought that the disciples were defiled because they ate with unwashed hands, but Jesus explains that that doesn't defile anyone.

If you eat something, it just goes through your system and then is expelled.

It goes in and out. *[pause]*

But it's really what comes out of the heart that defiles.

It's what comes out of the heart that shows that there's something wrong. *[pauseeee]*

The Pharisees were examples of this, for though they thought the disciples were the defiled ones - here they were.

They were worrying more about eating with unwashed hands than what was in their hearts. *[pause]*

Jesus says that it's actually from our hearts that all of these sins come to be.

Sin works itself from the inside-out, not the other way around. *[pause]*

Like I said earlier, we focus on the symptoms or surface level issues, but the root issue is our errant hearts. *[pauseeee]*

There's a reason you are being impatient with your family members: because your heart wants control.

There's a reason you lashed out at your co-worker: it came from a heart that wanted something. *[pauseeee]*

Sometimes after we do something sinful, we tend to say, “Wow, that wasn't me.”

But the truth is that it was you, it came from your heart, “for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”⁶ *[pauseeeee]*

Our hearts are what truly matter.

⁶ Matthew 12:34.

Christianity is not about mere ritual, never has been.

Rather, true Christianity is a matter of the heart. [pause]

It's time to stop thinking that the problem is outside of us, rather than the desires of our sinful hearts.

It's time to stop thinking that we can just do religious actions with no genuine heart. [pause]

Christians are to be people of the heart, who do things for the Lord from the heart, and who know that our sin comes from the heart.

And so we keep reminding ourselves that...

God cares about the heart!

He is not fooled by our facades.

He is not duped by our displays of mere outward religion. [pauseeee]

As Christians, we should be the least fake people in the world because we know that we have a God who sees and cares about the heart. [pauseeeee]

So let's get real with God, with ourselves, with others.

Let's no longer play a part. [pauseeee]

Some of you may have been playing the part of 'good, church-going Christian' all of your life, but you know it's not real.

Maybe for you, you attend church just because 'it's the thing to do', but deep down, you don't really care for the things of the Lord.

You try to do the least amount of religious things possible because you know it's only to make it seem like you are fine. [pause]

Or maybe you take the other extreme, where you do so much for Christ, but only to cover up what's really going on inside.

You are so active to make it appear like you have it all together, but deep down your heart is not in a good place. [pauseeee]

If any of those things are you, and we could probably all be guilty of these things to some degree, then it's time to focus back on our hearts. [pauseeeee]

Where's our hope? What can change us?

Only grace can change a heart. [pause]

When we truly recognize how sinful we are, and how gracious God is, we can't help but repent and live for Him.

For though we are often hypocrites, and our lives are often sinful messes, yet that didn't cause the Lord to draw away from us.

Rather, He loved us with an everlasting love.

He loved us so much that He sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place, taking the guilt and shame that we deserved upon Himself.

He did this so that we could be forgiven, and rest in the freedom of the words, "No condemnation".⁷ *[pause]*

It's that kindness that leads us to repentance.⁸

His grace trains our hearts to live for Him.⁹

So ponder and wonder at the Cross, looking to Christ, and let the grace of Christ sink down deep into your heart, and not just flow through your ears. *[pauseeee]*

In light of what Jesus has done, we don't have to put on shows of righteousness.

Because each of us can say, "I don't deserve anything, yet Christ has done it all." *[pause]*

We can admit that we are a mess because we know that we are.

We can admit that we don't have it together, for Jesus came for such people. *[pause]*

We don't stay there, of course, but we ask Him to help us, to change us, and to transform our hearts to love Him and serve Him more.

And when any good thing comes, any progress is made in our lives, and any heart change happens - we know that it came from Him. *[pauseeee]*

So take this time to dwell upon the amazing grace of Christ for you on the Cross.

And repent to the Lord, confessing your hypocrisy.

Say, "Lord, I don't know why I thought I could fool you, but I can't. You know all things, and you know and care about my heart.

So please forgive me for putting on a show, for acting one way, while my heart was in the other direction." *[pause]*

⁷ Romans 8:1.

⁸ A reference to Romans 2:4.

⁹ See Titus 2:11-12.

May we be people who genuinely follow Christ, and admit our daily need for Him. *[pauseeee]*

Why is it that church is the place that so many try to put on a mask of OK-ness, and try to put on a display of righteousness?

That ought not to be, for we are not to be hypocrites.

Rather, church should really be the place where you come in all of your messiness, and where you say, “Guys, I’m not OK, and I need help.”

And it should be a place where when someone says that, we don’t look down on them or sit back and do nothing.

But a place where we gather around that person, put our arm on their shoulder, and say, “I know it’s hard, I struggle, too, but let me encourage you, and point you to the place of help: Jesus Christ.” *[pause]*

Now that’s the beauty of genuine disciples, who simply look and cling to Christ to change and help them.

That’s a place that I want First Baptist to be, and I sure hope that you do, too.

So let’s cultivate and be a church that knows that the most important thing is not how we appear on the outside to others...

...But the most important thing is our hearts, transformed by His amazing grace, changing us to be genuine, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.