

Matthew 15:1-20

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked,

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

3 Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"

4 For God said, 'Honour your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.'

5 But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,'

6 they are not to 'honour their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

7 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

8 "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules." Isaiah 29:13

10 Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand.

11 What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them."

12 Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"

13 He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.

14 Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

15 Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."

16 "Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them.

17 "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?"

18 But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.

19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

20 These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them."

A heart for God

Matthew 15: 1-20

The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, and walk out the door, and deny him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.

This is a comment by Brennan Manning, a speaker who Annette mentioned the other week, and it's an echo of the verse from Isaiah which Jesus uses in our reading:

"These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules" Jesus was not generally angry or condemnatory of people, he challenged people but he also acknowledged faith wherever he saw it. He encouraged people. He healed people, physically and spiritually. He saw their needs and met them. People were invariably excited by their encounters with him. For him the only real target was what we would call church leaders, the Pharisees and teachers of the law we see in this passage.

We tend to think incidents in the gospels belong in the past and we find it difficult sometimes to apply them to our lives now.

But most of this is *totally* relevant to us 2000 years later.

I watched the documentary about the Bruderhof community at Darvell the other night on BBC1 and I was struck by how their Bernard, one of their leaders, said this:

'The purpose of the Bruderhof is to follow Jesus as closely as possible'. People may disagree with how the Darvell community live separately but Jesus has to be central to what we do as church too, even though we live in mainstream society and are very different in the way we do things.

It's easy to lose sight of how this should work, how Jesus would do things in 2020, in a very different world.

Jesus identified with the poor and marginalised, he spent time among those who were regarded as unacceptable and unsavoury to the synagogue hierarchy. Gentiles, prostitutes, lepers, none of these were off limits for Jesus.

I have christian friends who have been hounded out of a job by other christians for just the same offence, hanging around with the wrong people. In 2020.

But we don't do this hanging around with the wrong people nearly enough. It's very easy to spend all our time with like-minded people. (Manning): *"Though it is true that the church must always dissociate itself from sin, it can never have any excuse for keeping any sinner at a distance."* Many christians lose touch with their unbelieving friends. Or maybe their unbelieving friends find them a bit too intense!

The Pharisees all reinforced each others opinions, maybe because they didn't listen to the opposite point of view. Jesus just seems to have been good to hang around with. And Jesus broke all their rules.

He would probably break all our rules if we're honest. And we'd be shocked and appalled and question his theology!

Anyway, the issue the Pharisees had with Jesus at this particular point was first, topically!, that the disciples didn't wash their hands, (probably for 20 seconds), before meals. Jesus doesn't address this but he does point out that *their* laws broke the 5th commandment, to honour your parents. The Pharisees *korban* laws required that people committed money and property in perpetuity to the temple, at the expense of everything, even family, even parents. But sneakily they also bent the rules and spent some of this money, that was supposed to be set aside, on themselves.

So it was total hypocrisy to point the finger at Jesus, when they didn't even obey the 5th commandment themselves.

The difference was that Jesus, and so we too, should not be bound by rules that make no sense but are just empty religion. So, doing things because we've always done them, not because they further the kingdom of God. That's the principle - if our traditions serve God's purposes, fine, otherwise they just need to be got rid of.

Moving on, verse 10

Jesus called the crowd to him and 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."

So having disputed this with the Pharisees, notice that he now speaks to *the crowd* when it comes to the main point.

Thus probably embarrassing the Pharisees into the bargain.

The main point being that the source of all the bad things is not failing to keep the commandments, but the content of the human heart, verse 19.

That what we say and do is what defines us.

And what we say and do comes from what is truly in our hearts. So the facade we show to the world, like a politician might do, is not the important part.

A church leader I knew quite well, someone seen in his church as very much a role model to young people, was convicted of child abuse and now regards the church he led as a cult, and Christianity as ridiculous.

This proves how far from the truth it is that any of us, *especially* church leaders, is bulletproof.

We're all completely dependent on the grace and forgiveness of God. And if we're forgiven it's because we recognise the truth of this and stand on God's promise to honour his part of it, that He has enabled us to be forgiven through what Jesus has done, and that He gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit on a daily basis to enable us to grow into his likeness.

We are not made right with God by managing to keep the commandments out of our own determination.

We are made right with God, by God.

This is the only thing that makes us whole and healed as people.

The traditions and laws which the Pharisees depended on, and which the 'Pharisees' of today are also relying on, unfortunately count for nothing.

Brennan Manning again:

If the church remains self-righteously aloof from... irreligious and immoral people it cannot enter into God's kingdom. But if it is constantly aware of its guilt and sin, it can live in joyous awareness of forgiveness."

Joyous awareness of forgiveness, who would not want that?

Too often we put our faith in possessions and experiences, and more crucially in people who clearly cannot be trusted, instead of in the God who can always be trusted to tell the truth because He is the Truth.

To quote Jesus,

if the blind lead the blind they will both fall into the pit.

The gospel on the other hand tells us we can celebrate and worship a God whose overwhelming grace can save the whole world, if only we'd stop trying to save ourselves.

Amen.