

The Lord Condemned the Pharisees for Their Moral Defilement

Matthew 15:1-20

Matthew 15:1-20 - *"Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, ² 'Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.' ³ He answered and said to them, 'Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? ⁴ For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God"— ⁶ then he need not honor his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. ⁷ Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ⁸ 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. ⁹ And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"*

¹⁰ When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear and understand: ¹¹ Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." ¹² Then His disciples came and said to Him, "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" ¹³ But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch."

¹⁵ Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶ So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? ¹⁸ But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. ¹⁹ For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. ²⁰ These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

Background Notes

If you go to the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, you'll see orthodox Jews perform ritualistic washings before they go up to the Wall to pray. They practice ritual washings before they eat as well. This tradition goes all the way back to Bible days. The Pharisees referred to it when they asked the Lord, *"Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread"* (v2).

There was nothing in the Mosaic Law that required specialized washings before eating. The people were to be ceremonially clean when they worshiped the Lord, but there was nothing in the Law that required elaborate ritual washing of the hands before eating a meal. Over the years, however, the Jews had added to the Law of God, and these traditions

became known as the “Traditions of the Elders.” During the intertestamental period, when the Jews were in Babylon, many additional regulations were added to the Jewish way of life. Over the years these regulations became rules and ceremonies (“the tradition of the elders”).

Our Lord condemned these traditions, because often the Jews had made these traditions more important than the Word of God. In some cases, as here, these traditions were not only unbiblical, but they actually transgressed or invalidated the Word of God!

The Lord said to the Pharisees, *“Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?”* (v3) and *“You have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition”* (v6). And in verses 7-9 the Lord said, *“Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ‘ These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”*

There’s a proper place for good traditions - traditions that line up with the Word of God - but that’s not what was in view here! These unbiblical Jewish traditions were written down in what is known as the Jewish “Talmud,” and the Talmud is still followed by orthodox Jews today.

By the way, be careful not to confuse the “Talmud” with the “Torah.” The “Torah” is Bible! The “Torah” is the Law - the first five books of the Bible, or the Pentateuch. It’s an important part of the Word of God. The “Talmud” is not part of the Bible. It contains the traditional Jewish ceremonial laws that were added by Jewish leaders.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord condemned the Pharisees for their evil practice of *Corban*.

In response to the Pharisees’ complaint that the disciples weren’t ritualistically washing their hands, the Lord said, *“Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is [Corban] a gift to God’”* (v3-5).

The word *“corban”* means “given to God.” This is how the self-righteous Pharisees described their material possessions. They said their possessions were *corban* - “given to God.” Now there is nothing negative about the expression itself, “it is Corban” - given to God. In fact, *corban* can be used in a good way. But the scribes and Pharisees were using it in an evil way. In fact, this is the expression in the parallel account in Mark 7: *“But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban’—’ (that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother...”*

The Law of God commanded God's people to "Honor your father and mother" (v4). Honoring your father and mother certainly included taking care of them, especially in their older years. There were no pension plans or retirement plans in that day. But the greedy scribes and Pharisees were not willing to take care of their aging parents, and in order to get around the law they "took a *corban* vow." In other words, they declared that all their material possessions were *corban*, or given to God. "Sorry, Mom and Dad; I can't help you because I dedicated everything I have to God."

But these selfish people didn't actually give their material possessions to the Lord. They kept their possessions, and never followed up on their *corban* vow. Saying that their possessions were *corban* was just a way to get around God's Law, and an excuse for not taking responsibility to care of their aging parents. The Lord said this practice was **evil!**

There's a lesson here for us. The biblical commandment to honor our fathers and our mothers should certainly be followed today. We have a responsibility to care for our parents as they get older and need our help, including financial help in some cases. So let's be careful that we don't play **evil** "games" like this, like tying up our money in investments that can't be touched, and using that as an excuse for not helping where we should help.

This lesson also applies to making excuses for not supporting the Lord's work, or only giving token amounts to the Lord. From God's perspective, this is an evil practice. Let's examine our hearts. The Lord condemned the Pharisees for their evil practice of *Corban*.

2. The Lord condemned the Pharisees for the evil that proceeded out of their hearts.

The self-righteous Pharisees found fault with the disciples for not going through the traditional ritual washings, thus defiling themselves (or so the Pharisees thought and taught).

But the Lord said, "*Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'* When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "*Hear and understand: Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.*" (See Isaiah 29:13).

The Lord was not saying here, by the way, that you could drink poison or eat with dirty hands. Of course not! He was talking about **moral defilement**. Look at verses 17-20: "*Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.*"

What a lesson for us today! There are Pharisees in our local churches today, and they're very concerned about "appearing to be righteous." They have their own list of things that they do and they don't do, and that list may even include clothes and mannerisms! They even judge the spirituality of others by their lists.

But many of these very people have a **thought life** that is **morally corrupt**. Just like the Pharisees, they are selfish, proud, self-righteous, unforgiving, fault-finding, hypocritical and blind. They're modern Pharisees! There's a warning here for all of us, isn't there? The Lord condemned the Pharisees for the evil that proceeded out of their mouths.

Practical Application

Sometimes we should offend certain people!

"Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God..." (1 Corinthians 10:32).

"We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed" (2 Corinthians 6:3).

Those verses the norm for us as believers. We should be careful not to offend people. But there's a time and place for offending **certain** people!

Here in Matthew 15:12 the disciples said to Jesus, *"Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?"* Notice that the Lord didn't apologize for offending the Pharisees! Instead He said, *"Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch."* So there is a time and place for offending certain people.

Here's an illustration. It would be offensive if you were to get up and walk out of your church in a disruptive way, because you didn't like my style of preaching, or my clothes, or something else. But if I were teaching false doctrine – if I were to say, for example, that there's no such thing as hell, or that Jesus was only "a good man" but not fully God - then you **should** get up! It's important for you to refute my false teaching, whether I'm offended or not!

Normally we try not to offend people, but there's a time and place to offend **certain** people - like people who teach false doctrine, or people who promote moral decadence. So sometimes we **should** offend certain people. And it's high time that we begin to speak out and offend certain people! Think of the educators who are teaching atheistic evolution [and more recently, gender confusion]. They need to be offended! Think of the people in the media who are promoting moral decadence! **Sometimes we should offend certain people!**