



Matthew 15:15–20

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.”

Reflection

In response to Jesus’ extraordinary spate of recent miracles – the feeding of the five thousand, walking on water and calming a storm, and healing all who came to him simply by the touch of his cloak – the Jewish religious elite have sent a delegation of Pharisees and teachers of the law, all the way from Jerusalem, to speak with Jesus. John the Baptist had sent a similar delegation to ask Jesus if he was the One, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament scriptures. But instead of searching the scriptures to confirm that these miracles Jesus was performing were indeed evi-

dence that the Messiah had come amongst them, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were more concerned with their religious traditions. And so instead of coming to worship Jesus they came accusing him. Listen to them in chapter 15 verse 2,

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

Jesus is breaking with tradition and they don’t like it. He’s breaking with their religious traditions, a whole raft of rules and regulations that the Pharisees and teachers of the law had added on top of God’s word. All sorts of external religious practices that often had no grounding in Scripture, some of them even contradicted Scripture, but the worst of it was

that they'd begun to view these traditions as just as important as God's word, if not more so. And getting so caught up in all these religious rules that they'd added to the faith, they had begun to neglect the weightier matters of Judaism, like the ten commandments, and other minor things like the fact that the Messiah they'd been waiting for, for the last thousand years, was standing right in front of them and they were having a go at him because his disciples didn't wash their hands before dinner!

And so over the last couple of days we've seen Jesus putting them in their place. He's described them as hypocrites and as people who offer the appearance of honouring God with all their outward show, but actually underneath it all, their hearts

are far from God. They're worshipping God in vain and their teachings, well all they amount to is rules made up by men. And in yesterday's passage Jesus warned the crowds to leave them, to walk away from their religious leadership. Because they're blind guides so caught up in their own rules and traditions that they've become blind to the deeper truths of Scripture. If you follow them it will be like the blind leading the blind, both will fall into a pit. And by pit Jesus most likely means hell.

Don't follow them anymore or they'll lead you to hell. Strong public words from the son of God who's come to reform Judaism, and lead God's people who are wandering like a sheep without out a shepherd, back to God's word, and through it,

to God himself. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are leading them astray, Jesus has come to lead them back to God, and not just them, but all people from every nation who come to him in repentance and faith.

Today Peter asks Jesus, on behalf of all of the disciples, to explain something he's said in this exchange. Specifically, he wants to know what Jesus meant when he said in verse 11,

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

In love, Jesus rebukes his disciples, they've had front row seats and private tuition,

they should have understood, and so the most loving thing Jesus could do was to call them on it. Apparently this isn't the first time that they should have understood but hadn't. But what does Jesus mean here? Well, you'll remember this all started with handwashing, but whether it's not washing your hands and then putting food in your mouth, or even eating food that is thought of as unclean, Jesus is sick of them getting so caught up in the small stuff that they miss what truly matters. Faith in God isn't about ticking all these small religious boxes and then thinking that you're OK because you've followed all these man made ceremonies and religious activities. These Pharisees and teachers of the law, they wash their hands before eating, go to the synagogue several times a week, they pray in the marketplaces, and they

walk around with long faces when they are fasting. They put on such a wonderful outward show and it's become such a habit that their faith has come to rest in these religious practices and no longer in God himself. In addition they've become self-righteous and proud, as if all their display makes up for their sinful hearts. The people around them might look at all this and be fooled, but Jesus, like his Father, looks at the heart, not at these outward appearances and while they're doing all these self-righteous things and lapping up people's praise, their hearts are filled with evil thoughts. Jesus lists some of the evil common to human hearts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. Washing hands and eating certain foods is one thing, but true religion is about the state of your heart.

It's not what goes into a person that matters (food and the like) so much as what comes out. And out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.

We've heard Jesus speak like this before in a previous encounter with the Pharisees in Matthew 12. Then he said much the same with equally strong words,

34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. 35 A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.

Later on in Matthew 23 Jesus will refer to

the Pharisees and teachers of the law in this way,

27 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Think & Pray

Today’s is an uncomfortable passage. Jesus is taking aim at religious hypocrisy. Outward show disguising a wayward heart. All the appearances of being a Christian,

but an external faith that has never sunk into your heart, a heart which is much the same as everyone else's, except it attends church once a week. Jesus would ask you and I this morning are you we worshipping him with our lips, while our hearts are far from him? And the indicator of this is what we most often find ourselves thinking about and speaking about. Because out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks; what we say, gives us away.

Honestly, how are you going deep inside? Do you worship Jesus with your whole heart through repentance and faith or are you worshipping something or someone else in his place? The human heart is a slippery, deceitful thing, prone to wander and worship anything in place of Jesus. But as Christians we have been given a

new heart and a new spirit. And out of the overflow of our new heart we speak and act. Christianity isn't about rules or man-made traditions, it's not about looking good in public, or ticking all the boxes in your church; it's about a heart made clean and pure by the blood of Jesus resulting in a life that is transformed from the inside out. That's what Jesus is trying to teach the Pharisees and the crowds. They've got it all backwards, concentrating on the external, the small stuff while their hearts are deceived and very far from God; thinking perhaps that they've earned God's forgiveness which can only be received by grace. Pray this morning that you and I would continue to be transformed from the inside out by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that out of the overflow of our hearts we would speak and act to the glo-

ry of Jesus Christ.