



## **Matthew 15:1–9**

15 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, ‘Honor 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 ‘honor 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 honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’

## **Reflection**

Jesus has just fed up to 20,000 people with two fish and five small loaves, walked

on water, calmed a storm, and miraculously healed huge numbers of sick just by the touch of his cloak (Matt 14:13–36); only to be taken to task today by Israel's religious leaders for his disciples not washing their hands before eating a meal. Talk about not seeing the forest for the trees! Even on a surface level we have to ask ourselves how they could possibly be so petty. Here's Jesus performing miracles that almost undeniably identify him as the Messiah, if not the son of God himself. And the Pharisees, the religious elite, the most highly regarded religious people of the day, instead of worshipping him, following him, and influencing those in their care to do the same, accuse Jesus with the petty charge of his disciples not washing their hands before dinner.

Jesus says elsewhere that from everyone who has been given much, and entrusted with much, much will be demanded (Luke 12:48). So it is no wonder that Jesus has very strong words for these leaders of God's people in our passage today. But before we look at Jesus' response to their accusation it is important to provide a little bit of background.

The Pharisees' primary concern in accusing Jesus' disciples of not washing their hands before eating is not one of hygiene but one of religious purity. Washing one's hands before meals was not required by the Old Testament, but along with other ceremonial washings, had become an important part of the Pharisees' teaching in terms of ceremonial purity and ritual cleanness. Originally, and perhaps for all

the right reasons, they had taken the biblical emphasis on holiness and purity, and translated it into rules and traditions that they had then added on top of Scripture. And over time they had come to view their rules and traditions as being on par with God's word.

Jesus is devastating in his reply; and our Lord isn't one to bicker over the small stuff. As always, Jesus cuts straight to the heart of the matter when he says in verse three,

3 ... why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?

Jesus won't be drawn into a debate over something as petty as hand washing. He goes straight to the heart of the matter. 'Not only have you added to the word of

God with your traditions', he says, 'but even worse than that, the traditions that you've added to Scripture often contradict the very word of God.' In verse four he provides them with an example,

4 For God said, 'Honor 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 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

Jesus is referring to an insidious and despicable practice that was occurring amongst Jewish communities whereby people

were using religious traditions and rulings to circumvent their responsibilities under the fourth commandment. The term used was 'corban' which is quoted in Mark's version of this account. Corban means 'devoted to God' and was something that the Pharisees had added to the Old Testament law meaning that if you pronounced something 'corban' it meant that at some point in the future you would give it to the Temple. The practice that Jesus is referring to is deviously pronouncing something as 'corban' so that you can keep the use of it, and then cry poor, when it comes to selling the asset to help your ageing parents when they are in need. Not only is this in direct contravention to the fourth commandment, but also cuts against the whole grain of biblical teaching that places honouring, respecting and caring for your

mother and father as one of the highest priorities of our faith.

You can sense Jesus' anger as he pronounces them hypocrites and finishes by condemning in the words of Scripture:

8 “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’

Jesus' warning couldn't be stronger. It's all outward show, all their ceremonial washings, rituals, their prayers in the market places, long faces when they're fasting, and loopholes like pronouncing something 'corban'. Its self-serving, self-righteousness and outward show. Inwardly,



their hearts couldn't be further from God. In fact, they're worshipping God in vain, and are leading others astray by not teaching God's word at all, just rules made up by men.

## **Think & Pray**

Jesus is scathing. But before we come down too harshly on the Pharisees it's important to acknowledge that, to varying degrees, we are all guilty of doing the same. Later on in Matthew Jesus will pronounce judgement on the Pharisees with these words,

23 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected

the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

In our own personal walk with Jesus to what degree are we guilty of doing the same? How might we be similarly missing the forest for the trees?

As you consider again today's passage for yourself, please use it as a slide rule for your own life and ministry. Do you have your priorities right? All of our lives are patterned around habits and routines. Can you draw direct lines between the balance of God's word and its greatest priorities, and the emphases of your average week and average weekend? For instance, what place does justice, mercy, faithfulness, personal

holiness and evangelism have in your life? Or are the small things crowding these out? If life feels empty, or unsatisfying, or like something is missing I can assure you that this is why. It's because you're majoring on the minors. It's very common. Even with the very best of intentions like the Pharisees no doubt had, it is in our fallen human nature to stray, or be led astray by the devil, away from what is most important. So when was the last time you scrutinized the habits, and routines, and traditions of your personal life, and the life of your church? Are they broadly consistent with Scripture, or could it be that somewhere along the line things have gotten off track? And if so, what are you going to do?

Perhaps in a moment of honesty you might

also ask yourself whether you are just going through the motions in your Christian faith. How much of your faith is simply outward show, an honouring of God with your lips while your heart is drifting away from him? This is a season that every Christian goes through. And sometimes it takes a stern warning from Jesus like the one in our passage today to wake up and see the danger.

Why not take a some extra time today to think a little more broadly than usual over the make-up of your life. Perhaps it may be that Jesus' wake-up call for the Pharisees in today's passage may also represent an important turning point in your life. Either way, please close this time by responding to God's word, and this time of reflection, in prayer.