

Matthew 15:1–20

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[0 : 00] Matthew 15, 1-20 Matthew 15, 1-20 Matthew 15, 1-20

Matthew 15, 1-20 Thanks be to God.

Amen. Father, we desire to be a people that honor you with our lips and our hearts be near to you. we desire to be a people who do not worship you in vain but sit under your word and so Father in these next moments we pray for your help that you would give us ears to hear and eyes to see, heart to understand that we would be a transformed people useful for your purposes we ask these things for Jesus sake Amen on March 11, 2020 the United Nations World Health Organization announced the COVID global pandemic it wasn't until over three years later on March 5 of this year that the same body announced the end of the COVID-19 global health emergency many of us lived through it praise the Lord and though we would like to forget it it has left its impact in countless ways affecting families the loss of loved ones affecting the workplace religious life and society as a whole at its initial stages you might recall we were told to isolate remain socially distant mask up and thoroughly wash our hands and if you adhered to these recommendations they would be your best means of avoiding contracting the virus the aim was to avoid being physically contaminated and if you were contaminated you would have to quarantine avoid contact with others to prevent further transmission

I don't want to recount more of the pandemic we can all share it in numerous ways how the world completely changed yet I use it as an example from recent memory to illustrate the concept of defilement it's come up in our text multiple times as we've seen but it's the condition that immediately separates one from people from loved ones in society biblically speaking defilement is to make something unclean to make profane COVID made us aware of being unclean and defiled yes to be defiled is a religious concept in our text but it had social, physical and emotional effects defiled or contaminated individuals were shunned and put out of society they could only be restored through ritual washing and animal sacrifice for us, COVID we were largely restored through quarantine the opposite of being defiled is to be pure purity was a big deal for Israel it was interwoven in the nation's identity as a people it was how they were distinguished from all other people from all other nations how they lived what they ate how they worshipped who was in their company all were carefully laid out by the Old Testament in a legal code it may have some of these cleansing rituals may have been hygienic but it was primarily for religious reasons one commentator put it helpfully purity laws taught Israel the protocols for addressing and entering the presence of a holy God there was a legal code for the people a stricter one for the priests a very strict one for the high priests and the purity protocols the people reminded them that God was in their midst and accessing him was on his own terms if you submitted to these purity laws it was a means of honoring the king that ruled over the nation and this morning

[6 : 47] I want to speak to us regarding matters of the human heart it is important to see that the heart matters as the heart is essential to physical life we'll find that in the Christian faith the heart is essential to our spiritual life physically it circulates blood through our bodies but spiritually it is the center it is the seat of our affections our will it is that which manifests all of our desires our ambitions our affections it values beauty and expresses love to be a Christian requires a cleansing of a defiled heart to be a Christian requires the cleansing of a defiled heart and it cannot be accomplished through human obedience obedience or effort that's what I hope you get this morning to be a Christian requires the cleansing of a defiled heart and it cannot be accomplished through our obedience or effort our passage will diagnose the condition of the human heart if I were experiencing any heart abnormalities

I would go to the cardiologist for a diagnosis and explanation and here Jesus will diagnose the human heart and present us with its dire condition I'll organize the text under two headings this

morning we'll see in verses 1 to 9 a distant heart a distant heart and it's followed by verses 10 through 20 a defiled heart a distant heart and a defiled heart Jesus' ministry has continued picking up steam in verse 1 the region of Genesaret Genesaret had experienced unmatched healing all the sick had been made well Matthew wants us to know that the news was spreading and it has reached the capital Jerusalem Jerusalem decides to send a delegation they arrive from Jerusalem and it's comprised of according to verse 1

Pharisees and scribes they were representatives of the religious authority they were gatekeepers to Israel's religion and worship they would have been sent to validate Jesus' ministry they are supposed to legitimize if he is credible worthwhile does he actually adhere to Judaism but instead of validating Jesus' ministry instead of authenticating Jesus' ministry what we find is the religious leadership is antagonizing Jesus Judaism instead of making space for Jesus and receiving him mounts a confrontation against him and the confronting question that concerns Jesus' disciples failure to wash their hands before eating now I just want to say from the outset for you children here it is good to wash your hands before eating though the passage says it does not matter it does matter because I tell my kids to do it all the time and today we wash our hands because it's hygienic for hygienic reasons it prevents the transmission of bacteria possible illness ingestion of any unwanted germs but in the passage for the

Pharisees and scribes it was not it was less a matter of hygiene it was more a matter of holiness see ritual washing hand washing demonstrated one's devotion to God and one's dedication to the law it's debated where the tradition emerges from because there's no explicit instruction in the Old Testament to wash one's hands before eating rather it's probably derived from a corpus of material in the book of Leviticus particularly chapters 14 and 15 and 22 people would be religiously unclean and unfit to approach God unless they purified themselves after they would Leviticus 14, 15, 22 all stipulate if you come into contact with certain people or certain objects a corpse an animal corpse you were contaminated defiled and you would have to wash and wait until the end of the day to become clean again you see the purpose of these laws in Leviticus was really to keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness less the writer puts it this way less they die in their unclean list by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst so in other words

God wanted his people to remain undefiled because he was in their presence that if you dared approach God without being clean it would be destructive see in other words the prerequisite to Israel's worship was that they were to be clean and undefiled in order to approach God one had to be cleansed and pure defilement would draw disaster namely death and from the outset of the nation of Israel there was a clear understanding that approaching God required one to be undefiled and untainted if one dare draw near to God flippantly disregarding the protocol in place it would lead to death the priests in particular were engaged in thorough washing before serving the Lord if they touched anything that was considered unclean object or person they were required to wash the entirety of their body before returning to service what applied to the priests it seems here was now transposed to the people it was applied to all people we often think of these laws as restrictive but the principle that underpins them is actually dedication and devotion the thinking goes like this if God is in our midst if God is among us then we ought to do everything in our power to prescribe holiness to ensure that God stays here as a result a tradition such as washing one's hands before eating emerges as a display and demonstration of one's allegiance and devotion to God and it is with this prescribed tradition that the

[13 : 55] Pharisees and the scribes confront Jesus see the accusation goes like this if you are truly from God Jesus and all about God then how come your disciples don't show the devotion or dedication that we do why don't they demonstrate it by washing their hands before they eat don't they know that they've been contaminated by the people around them especially now you're in Gennesaret so far from the capital there's Gentiles all over this place people who don't adhere to Jewish law and you Jesus what about you you have been touched grabbed by bleeding women diseased individual the leprous the blind and they all reach out to touch you you're defiled you're unclean how could you be devoted to

God is the question if you're rubbing shoulders with all these people and Jesus responds to their criticism with a question of his own why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition he cites the fifth commandment and Jesus calls them out and cites their failure to honor their mother and their father there's some background I want to give here that's important see the religious tradition had formulated this exemption clause skirt the need to honor their parents by

neglecting them so the fifth commandment honor your father and your mother was given for the well-being of society particularly moms and dads the children were to honor them by providing for them financially in their old age if you were an Israelite parent your children were your social security your children were your retirement fund yet the religious tradition had created a practice called

Corban you'll see it in Mark chapter 7 if you turn there and it allowed one to declare or set aside a sum of money that was devoted to God dedicated to God and that money was solely restricted for religious use it was placed in this restricted fund that could only be used for religious purposes so as mom and dad got older they come to a son and they say can you help us financially the son would say oh you know what I would love to help you however all the money that I could use to support you and help you is!

Corban it is set aside and I'm unable to access it because it's set aside as a gift to God you see their tradition was to demonstrate being devout but had become destructive a sign of devotion human devotion was actually disregard for God's intended purposes this leads to Jesus outrage in verses 6 to 7 tradition human tradition human devotion had somehow superseded!

the very command of God human ideas had elevated themselves over the word of God and their devotion was hypocrisy verse 7 they're pretending they're pretending with entirely perverse and condemned Jesus says you're just like your forefathers you honor me with your lips but your hearts are so far from me you worship me in vain you teach as doctrines the commandments of men see the religious people of Israel could talk the talk but they did not walk the walk the devotion was simply a public display it was a show that had no significance and the end is tragic their worship is in vain because their hearts are far from God and their devotion is unaccepted by God it was worthless and wasted you see it's not too far from our thinking today the human tradition

[18:39] I would argue is largely synonymous with human effort it's all that you and I do it's all that we give effort to with the hope that it makes us stand right before God see the warning sounded in these first nine verses is that there is a religious zeal and a religious devotion that is expressed in ritual possible habits obligation and it seems to demonstrate dedication but in the end it's actually meaningless because the heart is distant from God the sincerest of our human efforts the most valiant attempts we make do not bridge this distance between God and man the heart is distant not because it lacks sincerity or devotion the heart is distant because it lacks submission to

God and it lacks submission to the means whereby God draws near I'm going to explain this a little bit more because it's important you and I think if I'm very sincere God will accept me if I work really hard God will receive me but the passage actually tells us there is a devotion and a dedication that in the end is totally vain you see a distant heart disregards the word of God you see it in the lives of the Pharisees and the scribes the word of God is here you know I think I could come up with a better way to express devotion so let me set aside some money that's for

God let me take this ritual washing and apply it to daily washing every meal I don't know how many meals you eat a day I eat more than I need to eat a meal a day but every day they're washing to demonstrate devotion and this is what happens human ideas human conceptions I actually know better than the word of God I can do it better than what God prescribed but you see the danger is that you when you and I begin to fashion ideas of what is acceptable to God we undermine the word of God to our peril you see it throughout the whole story of the Bible it starts early on Cain and Abel one brought what was acceptable one brought what was rejected the people of

God were to bring the first fruits of their labors or their agricultural fruits the best animals without blemish and yet they thought oh you know what I'm going to keep the best animals for myself because I could sell them for the best profit and instead I'm going to give to God the blind the lame the crippled animals the diseased Jeroboam the king when the kingdom had split north and south Jerusalem was in the south he had this great idea to construct a temple and he said I'm going to put a temple in the north in Dan not in Jerusalem and God will meet us there right I'm going to build it just like the temple in Jerusalem I'm going to copy it and little did he know little did he care that he as he set up a temple elsewhere as a display of his power that

God only resided in Jerusalem you see the Bible is replete littered with examples of misdirected acts of devotion and the warning has been sounded a distant heart is one that conceives of a personal way to worship God that is not revealed by the word of God it's a human enterprise a rejected enterprise a vain enterprise and I couldn't help but think of a recent conversation that I entered I'm always a little hesitant to share what I do professionally when I meet strangers but with

this stranger I share I pastor I'm a pastor I'm part of a pastoral team at a local church and as the conversation progressed there was a line that still rings in my head this individual said you do your church thing and I'll never forget it and I haven't forgotten I will worship God my own way beware if you worship

[24 : 06] God your own way you will not only find yourself on the way to death but on a path to destruction the word of God prescribes how the people of God are to worship God you have to remember that you cannot make up how you worship God you cannot make up how you will get to God the word of God prescribes how the people of God are to worship God a distant heart is not one that lacks devotion or dedication no a distant heart is one that lacks direction namely a focus upon the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ you see a distant heart and it's followed by a defiled heart verses 10 through 20 the delegation from Jerusalem has been called out and condemned and

Jesus now turns to the people around him and he says as they gather they're here and understand and he wants to explain the fallacy of religious tradition the religious tradition of hand washing verse 11 is really the center of meaning for this passage it's not what goes in the mouth of an individual that defiles a person but what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person the disciples notice that the Pharisees are offended in verse 12 and it concerns them their train of thought is hey Jesus we don't want to get on the wrong side of this group we actually need to gain their side or need to gain legitimacy if this whole movement of this kingdom is actually going to continue if if we are going to gain a seat at the table or reside in the halls of religious power we need them on our side and Jesus is not interested in joining forces with the

Pharisees at all rather he points out to them that they do not have a heavenly origin they are as we studied a few weeks back weeds that have been sown in God's garden by the evil one rather than having the true and good seed sown by Jesus they are sown by the devil himself and when it's all said and done they will be rooted up because they are illegitimate they are blind regarding true religion and they are blind guides!

misleading God's people and Jesus the fiery furnace Peter kind of returns to this whole thing of defilement and asks Jesus for a further explanation in verse 15 and Jesus calls attention to the heart of a person it's not something outward that comes into a person that defiles them no rather the heart by nature is the source of all things that defile it's not that you grow up I'll put it this way it's not that you grow up and your parents and your friends and culture around you and all of its influence that end up with you having a distorted and defiled heart that's not what Jesus is saying our hearts are not nurtured toward law breaking no our hearts by nature are law breaking yes I want to acknowledge that the environment around you and your upbringing can certainly play a role in formation but fundamentally and foundationally it stems from one's own heart humanity in other words humanity has a greater propensity for evil than it does for good and how do I know I don't know of any nation any kingdom any government any society that runs with no laws laws are a prohibition largely to keep a stable and safe society why laws are there because the propensity of the human heart is to do what is wicked each family I know has a set of rules and it may vary from household to household but I know of no home that has no law why because the heart is deceitful above all things and it is desperately sick the prophet Ezekiel reminds us that our hearts are cold and dead as stone inclined to walk away from

[28 : 57] God's very statutes all societies do everything in our power to legislate what is good just and equitable because by nature our hearts manifest evil thoughts murder adultery sexual immorality theft false witness and slander more and more I find myself looking out there looking for something out there to blame what is actually happening in here Jesus says the opposite when you look at all the brokenness out there all the fallenness out there all the wickedness out there all the horrific things out there what we need to blame is actually in here it's been said for

Christianity that the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart and if defilement flows out of my heart then I need some remedy that will resolve this heart or change this heart and if you follow me closely the pressing question is then what can change my heart because we've seen external ritual external practices though they may be well intentioned they are inadequate to actually achieve God's approval well in the Old Testament defilement was removed not by human ingenuity but through divine declaration God told his people how purity was received or achieved they would wash ritually the priests or the Aaronic priesthood and present a sacrificial offering and upon completing those acts they would be declared clean and you may as I was reflecting on this I'm like well that that's so external they did something and they received this isn't that kind of like a works

based salvation but it's not we may think they're outward displays of devotion but it's not the act or the actions itself that accomplish the cleansing let me

I want to speak carefully here because I think I could misspeak it's easy to mistake in the idea that ritual cleansing and the sacrificial offering cleared the defilement oh if I just jump in this pool wash my hands sacrifice bring a dove it would be misleading to think that if I just bathe in the mikvah the Jewish ritual bath and slaughter a dove that somehow magically I become clean I do this and I get this that's what it sounds like but it's not performing the duty it's not the performance of the duty that makes cleansing effectual but it's actually the divine pronouncement now follow along closely it's because God pronounced this prescribed task as acceptable that it's actually effectual it's because God said do it this way that there's actually meaning in the washing meaning in the sacrifice that brings about cleansing let me put it another way we do not put faith in the ritual or human tradition or whatever we deem as effort no we are to actually put faith in the one who stipulates these conditions whereby we're cleansed it's bizarre to put faith in water or an put faith in the one who actually declares that the water and the animal will make you clean and in so doing you would be declared righteous for the righteous live by faith and this applies to us as Christians because the reality of defilement is still true our hearts are defiled and need to be cleansed the temptation is to do what Pharisees and scribes had implemented I'll do what I think will make me clean I'll be generous I'll be morally good I will volunteer I will participate in social activism

I'll become an environmentalist and all these things are good but according to the Bible none of them make you clean and so the message of the New Testament is the same message as the Old Testament that God has prescribed what is acceptable worship not only has he prescribed it in the New Testament he provides it he provided the very offering to accomplish it that it is he who gave his only begotten son subjected him to a horrific death upon the cross summoned him up out of the grave seated him in the heavenly places and for the ordinary reader it seems like a vicious and gruesome story however for the Christian this vicious and gruesome story becomes effectual when taken by faith it's not every act or crucifixion brings your forgiveness it's only one and it's your seizing of that one it's your embracing of that one it's the belief in that one it's your trusting in that one in the giving of

[35 : 04] God's son a pronouncement is given that in that act is found the forgiveness of your sins in that act our hearts are cleansed from our defilement when taken by faith in that act our lives are actually reconciled to God in that act our sins are atoned for eternal life secured and our hearts are made new and so when the day comes and you're speaking with your neighbor and you say what makes they ask you what makes a Christian so different why is your worship so distinctive!

or unique? and it's this that God provided and God pronounced this is the way we approach Him it is through His Son through His Son's sacrifice that we can come and our worship is acceptable it is through this single act of the cross that distant hearts are brought near and defiled hearts are made clean Father we we thank you that we are not left to our own devices conjuring up creative ways to worship you to please you to appease!

you to woo you no we don't want to give in to human ingenuity or tradition but we want to come under the word of God the command of God to come to God through your Son the Lord Jesus and in so doing we will find that the distance between us is removed the defilement in us is cleansed and we are given new hearts where we are able to worship and serve you and to truly honor you and so Lord help us help us and remind us not to be too clever with how we come to you but to rely on your word and your promises in the Lord Jesus we pray these things in his name Amen