

Misperceptions of Jesus: #5
"Jesus: The Breaker of Tradition"

Matt. 15:1-20

--CEFC 12/15/19; 12/17/00

Topic: Jesus;

What does a Christian look like?

In other words, how would you know that someone you worked with
or lived near was a follower of Christ?

I can think of several common markers--

1. If someone carries a Bible around, especially a well-worn Bible,
you might think he was a Christian.
2. If a person goes to a church a lot, you would suppose she was a Christian.
3. If the person displays some kind of Christian symbol--
probably not a cross around the neck, not if it's a woman--
that's too common--
but a fish sticker on a car bumper, that might do it.
4. If the person refuses to smoke or drink, that might be a clue.
5. If the person doesn't use crude language of any kind,
then you may guess that the person might be a Christian.
6. If a person prays before eating a meal, you might count that as evidence.
7. In the minds of some, if the person is a pro-life Republican,
that might do it.

There used to be a lot more of these--

if a person didn't dance or go to movies;
or if a person didn't work on Sunday, to name just a few.

These are all commonly perceived characteristics of Christians--
things that people often identify as Christian behavior,
they are popular markers of Christian identity

Every social grouping has these kinds of symbols that mark them out--
some distinctive behaviors or beliefs that provide
boundaries for their group to help establish who is in and who is out.

And even within groups, the location of these boundary markers
may be at different points.

And these sorts of things can determine the lines of fellowship--
often in very strict terms.

One poem expresses this well:

*Believe as I believe, no more, no less;
That I am right, and no one else, confess;
Feel as I feel, think only as I think;
Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink;
Look as I look, do always as I do;
And then, and only then, I'll fellowship with you.*

Yes, we all draw our boundary lines somewhere,
and the people of Israel in the time of Jesus had their own boundary markers, too.

A true Jew circumcised his sons on the eighth day after birth;

a true Jew offered the prescribed sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem;
a true Jew observed the law of the Sabbath;
and a true Jew kept kosher--
and tried to avoid anything that would make him ritually impure or unclean.

These were serious matters--
in fact, people risked their very lives for these things.¹

In the Jewish history of the second century before Christ,
in the second book of Maccabees we read of one such incident:
"The king sent an Athenian senator to compel the Jews
to forsake the laws of their ancestors
and no longer to live by the laws of God; . . .

Eleazar, one of the scribes in high position, . . .
was being forced to open his mouth to eat swine's flesh.
But he, welcoming death with honor rather than life with pollution,
went up to the rack of his own accord, spitting out the flesh."²

Such courageous stands were celebrated and honored in the time of Jesus.

And surrounding the God-given commandments
about how a Jew ought to live,
there grew up a whole host of binding traditions--
often described as a hedge around the law.

These traditions often did God one better, just to make sure that the law was kept.

¹Wright, JVG, 398

²Cf. 2 Macc. 6:1,2,5,6,10,11,18,19.

So, for example, if the law prescribed
that a man could receive only 40 lashes in punishment,
the tradition put the limit at 39, just in case someone miscounted.

And if the law prescribed that the priests on certain occasions
had to wash their hands ceremonially to insure ritual cleanness before God,
then why shouldn't that be done all the time by everyone?

And that practice of hand-washing
became a deeply imbedded Jewish custom
that attained the force of law.

The rabbis had extended discussions about
exactly what constituted compliance to this new law.

This was codified in the second century A.D. in what is called the *Mishnah*.

It contains passages, for example, specifying just how much water must be used
to make a ceremonial purification of this kind valid--

"If a man poured water over the one hand with a single rinsing,
his hand is clean;

but if over both hands with a single rinsing, R. Meir declares them unclean
unless he pours over them a quarter-log or more" (M. Yad. 2:1).³

So when some Pharisees and teachers of the law
came from Jewish headquarters in Jerusalem
to check out this new controversial preacher in Galilee,
you can imagine their consternation when they observed

³ One log is about half a liter (=2 cups); a quarter-log would be about a half a cup.

that his followers showed no concern for the revered traditions of Israel
regarding such a central matter of ritual purity before God.

"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?" they asked Jesus.

"They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

This had nothing to do with hygiene,

as if Jesus and his disciples had failed to learn

all they needed to know in kindergarten.

No, this had everything to do with theology,

and through theology to national loyalty and patriotism.

Hand-washing had become one of those sacred markers, a boundary line,

that defined the people of God as distinct from the pagan invaders of their land.

Jesus' apparent disregard for this practice was nothing less than a treasonous act.

"Tell us, Jesus, why don't you care about Jewish purity?"

Why don't you care about holiness before God?

Tell us, Jesus, are you really indifferent to the ways handed down to us by our fathers

on which our very identity as a people depends?"

This was the charge leveled against our Lord.

And his response is telling,

challenging the whole religious system that they held dear.

It comes in two forms,

and in the process Jesus addresses two critical issues –

related to authority and authenticity.

Jesus uses this disputation to declare what must be our supreme authority
and what constitutes true religion.

First, Jesus confronts his accusers concerning the matter of authority.

What is the proper authority in Israel--

Is it human tradition or the Word of God?

These religious leaders accuse Jesus of a serious transgression
in the form of a question,

"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?"

He responds with his own accusation,

by firing back a counter question--

"And why do you break the command of God

for the sake of your tradition?"

The Pharisees' immediate response to that would surely be,

"No, we would never break the command of God for the sake of our traditions--

our traditions are only the means

by which we keep the command of God.

They aid us in our duty."

Not so, says Jesus--

and he gives a specific example.

You know the fifth commandment--

'Honor your father and mother'

and then another command of the law given to Israel in Exod. 21:17--

'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'

These come from God.

Caring for one's parents was a fundamental duty.

But you use one of your traditions concerning the making of a vow

to escape from your God-given responsibilities to your parents.

Evidently, some Jews were pledging money, or other material resource, to the temple

to be paid upon their death—

in a kind of living trust.

These funds couldn't be transferred to anyone else,

including their parents,

but they could still be used for their own benefit while they were still alive.⁴

"Need help paying for your prescription drugs?

Sorry, Mom, but all my cash has been vowed to the temple."

How convenient!

No--How perverse!--

using the traditions related to a religious vow to undermine

and to override a divine command.

v. 6--"Thus," Jesus said, "**you nullify the word of God**

for the sake of your tradition."

Here, Jesus isn't attacking all tradition--

that would be unreasonable and, in fact, impossible.

⁴Cf. Blomberg, see note from J.A. Fitzmyer, cited there.

For most of the guidelines for our lives are based on tradition--

the way of life handed down to us.

The language we speak is based on tradition.

The way we dress is based on tradition.

The food we eat is based on tradition.

These traditions vary from culture to culture, from time to time,
and most of them are not morally good or bad.

Jesus is talking here about levels of authority--

Which is more important to us?

Which has a greater claim on our obedience?--

our inherited traditions or the commands of the Word of God?

And when our traditions hinder our obedience to God,

or when they contradict the command of God,

they must change.

We must not be bound by them.

This, of course, was a central issue

during the time of the Reformation in the 16th century.

The Protestant Reformers contended that the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church
had obscured the message of the word of God.

Traditions about Mary, for example,

had exalted her to the position as the Queen of Heaven,

who was a co-redeemer with Christ.

As a result, the worship of Jesus Christ was diminished,

and the proclamation of his saving work on the cross was confused.

The Reformers repeated these words of Jesus to their Catholic opponents--

**"You nullify the word of God
for the sake of your tradition."**

The Reformers said,

"No--we must return to the authority of the word of God--the Bible.

Scripture alone must be our final authority."

And we are heirs of that great Reform movement in the church.

"Where stands it written?" is the test of authority.

But the Reformers were well aware of the perversities of the human heart.

They knew that the reforms which they made

could themselves become new and binding traditions.

And they insisted that the church must be, in their phrase,

Semper Reformanda--

always in the process of reforming itself,

always checking its traditions against the clear word of God.

We must be always reforming according to the Word of God,

for the church practices handed down to us

can lose their meaning over time,

becoming empty traditions hindering our obedience to the word of God.

This passage raises the important issue of *adding* to the commands of God.

God had commanded the priests to wash at certain times

but the Pharisees extended that to *everyone, all the time*.

And as so often the case,

when people add to the word of God
they end up valuing their own additions above Scripture itself.

Their traditions become the most significant markers of Christian behavior.

So for the Amish, wearing plain clothes and riding in a black buggy
defines who they are.

Or closer to home,

whether a person is Republican or Democrat becomes

becomes a defining feature of whether they are a Christian or not.

Such traditions can become hard to spot

because they can become so much a part of our Christian culture.

Traditions become established fairly easily,

I think of the famous example of the woman who always

cut off the end of her roast before she put it in the oven.

One day her daughter asked her why she did that,

and she said she didn't know,

but that that's the way her mother always did it,

and she would do it no other way.

So the daughter went to ask her grandmother why she cut the end off her roast.

"Oh that's simple," she said, "because my roasting pan was too short."

That's how traditions begin!

I have now been at this church long enough to be able to

give you an example in our church life--



For a long time, we had a Wednesday night prayer meeting,

and it started at 7:15.

Now some may have thought that that meeting time was set in conformity

with some deep biblical truth--

that 7:15 is the divinely appointed hour for God's people in be in prayer--

one-fourth of an hour short of the midpoint of the day's fourth watch,

or something like that.

But no, there was a very practical reason we started at 7:15--

We had started prayer meeting at 7:30,

but then we had a soup and salad dinner on Wednesday nights

that ended about 7:00.

And people would just be sitting around for half an hour with nothing to do,

so we decided to start prayer meeting 15 minutes earlier.

That dinner passed away, but the new time remained,

and we just never changed it.

Again, that's how sacred traditions sometimes begin.

The Wednesday night prayer meeting itself

was a cherished tradition in our church

for a long time.

Let me tell you,

it was a very delicate matter indeed when we decided to give more focus

to small groups meeting in homes during the week

rather than having one meeting at church,

and we dropped that mid-week prayer meeting.

How people dress can become a tradition in a church.

Some people like to dress up when then come to worship—

men may wear a tie, like this--
as a reminder that this is a special occasion that merits a certain formality.

I want people to who dress up to feel welcome.

Other people like to dress down when they come to worship—

like my wife who wore jeans to church this morning,

so that other people won't feel out of place

if they aren't dressed up.

The Bible gives us no directions as to how people should dress

when the church gathers

other than that women should dress modestly.

All the rest is tradition.

Let me emphasize at this point—

there is nothing wrong with traditions.

In many ways they can be very helpful.

We can learn a great deal from the wisdom of the past.

We ought to respect the decisions of those who have gone before us

A good piece of advice I've heard is

"Don't pull down a fence until you know why it was put up in the first place."

But let's not invest traditions with more sanctity and authority

than they deserve.

And, you know, we are at the most traditional time of the year.

Christmas has all sorts of traditions associated with it--

putting up Christmas trees, lighting Advent candles,

sending cards, giving gifts.

Whether you realize it or not,

it is only a Christian tradition that Jesus was born on Dec. 25.

And even the celebration of Christmas itself is a Christian tradition.

There is nothing in the word of God about such a practice.

In fact, one of our favorite Christmas hymns, *Joy to the World*,

was written by a Puritan who didn't celebrate Christmas at all.

So we must be especially sensitive to these words of Jesus this morning.

Are we in danger of nullifying the word of God

for the sake of our traditions?

Does our celebration of Christmas in any way

direct our attention away from the clear commands of God?

Do we fail to worship God because we are too busy shopping?

Do we fail to share with those in need

because our tradition says that we have to spend so much on ourselves?

We dare not nullify the word of God for the sake of our traditions.

Jesus has harsh words for anyone who allows that to happen--

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.' "

May we be able to discern the difference between the word of God
and rules taught by men.

As I said, it is very easy to confuse the two.
And it is much easier to spot this sort of thing in others,
than in ourselves.

These words from the prophet Isaiah
point Jesus to another issue raised by his Pharisaic accusers.

Not only does he challenge them with regard to the proper authority,
he also directs them to authentic religion, **true righteousness--**
a righteousness not of empty ritual
but of heart response to God.

**"These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.**

In all their concern about hand washing before eating meals,
these very scrupulously religious people hadn't understood
what real uncleanness before God was all about--

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

11 **What goes into a man's mouth does not make him `unclean,'
but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him `unclean.'"**

Could it be that Jesus was really saying that people like Eleazar
had been tortured and died in vain when they refused to eat pork?

Does that cherished symbol of Jewish identity have no significance at all?
Jesus couldn't possibly be saying that, could he?

It's no wonder that we read in v. 12--

12 Then the disciples came to him and asked,

"Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"

Jesus replied in a way that we can only describe as "snippy"--

"Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted

will be pulled up by the roots.

14 Leave them; they are blind guides.

If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

The Pharisees thought they were the divinely authorized leaders of Israel.

Jesus obviously disagreed.

And Jesus displays his own divine authority is saying so.

So Peter came to Jesus and said, "Explain the parable to us."

What could this mean?

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

This is something that is so essential to all that Jesus has been teaching

that he seems frustrated that his disciples are so slow in grasping it.

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 the mouth come from the heart,

and these make a man `unclean.'

19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality,

theft, false testimony, slander.

20 These are what make a man `unclean';
but eating with unwashed hands does not make him `unclean.'"

If you want to be "clean"--

in other words, if you want to be right with God,

and fit to enter into his presence--

you need to understand this very clearly. /

Two things concerning the nature of authentic religion, this true righteousness,

emerge from these words of Jesus--

1. The first thing that strikes me is how pessimistic Jesus is

about the moral quality of human nature.

He is saying to his disciples--

"Can't you see--the problem of human sin

is much deeper than you could have imagined."

The true righteousness God desires is not a matter of

following a few rules about what you eat or don't eat.

The problem is much deeper than that--

the problem of human sin goes down to the depth of the human heart.

Sin is not simply a matter of external influences--

our upbringing or our environment.

Our problem is not the world acting on us.

Sin is a matter of internal corruption--

the problem is our sinful heart acting in the world.

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

Evil is not just *out there*--in the world.

It is *in here*--it comes out of our hearts.

This has always been the case—as the history of Israel so clearly demonstrates.

God gave Israel a perfect law,

but that law only stirred up more and more rebellion.

You can try to abide by the rituals of righteousness--

you can keep kosher and all the rest,

but you still haven't dealt with the real problem--

a heart full of selfishness and sin.

It is not simply that sinning makes us sinners;

No, we sin *because* we are sinners.

And no merely outward, cosmetic treatments will do.

Jesus, in line with the prophets who were before him,

had nothing but disdain for an outward religion of empty ritual,

which so easily put up with the much more serious matters of sin.

Matt. 23:23 **"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!**

You give a tenth of your spices --mint, dill and cummin.

But you have neglected the more important matters of the law --

justice, mercy and faithfulness."

This is hypocrisy of the worst sort--

and we engage in it, too.

Oh, if only I abide by the outward forms of evangelical Christian behavior,
then I must be right with God--

If I attend church, most of the time,
read the Bible once in a while,
don't smoke, drink or chew or go with girls who do--
then I'll be OK.

No--

God wants our hearts,
and our hearts are corrupt--
issuing in all sorts of filth in God's sight--every day.

The angry words, the lustful thoughts,
the jealous longings, the subtle lies, and self-exalting pride--
no religious rituals can deal with those.

As Isaiah says, "**These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.**

They worship me in vain;" (Isaiah 29:13)

Their worship is empty,
and it is meaningless in God's sight.

But there is something else that Jesus wants us to know--

something that doesn't emerge here,
but which is central to his entire ministry.

If the problem of human sin

is much deeper than we could have ever imagined,
then **the solution to the problem of human sin**

is more gracious than we could have ever hoped for.

Jesus has come not to impose new rules on us from the outside--
but to offer a new power at work for us on the inside.

He has come to give us a new heart.

He has come to change our fundamental orientation in life--
including our minds, our emotions, and our wills.

Isn't this the promise of the new covenant that the Lord would make with his people
when he would come to restore them.

As Moses prophesied in Deut. 30:6--

**"The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts . . . ,
so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."**

Or as Jeremiah foresaw in Jer. 31:33--

**"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,"
declares the LORD.**

**"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God, and they will be my people."**

Jesus said to Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel,

"If you are to enter the kingdom of heaven,
you must be born again."

And the good news is that you can be born again,
you can have a fresh start with a new heart.

When we come to God with a broken and contrite heart,
he promises to replace it with a heart in which Christ dwells by his Spirit.

He will work to change us from the inside
so that one day, when we are raised with him in glory,
our heart will be pure and holy--
in its every thought and desire.

That's what we need--nothing less will do--
and that is just what Christ promises all who come to him in faith--
a new heart.

Only this results in authentic religion in Jesus' mind.

"Are you still so dull?" Jesus says to his disciples.

"Don't you see . . ."

It's not your food,
it's your hearts.
It's not what you eat,
but what you think.
It's not what goes in,
but what comes out.
It's not ritual,
but righteousness that matters to God.

That's why only a solution that deals with your hearts
can bring you to him.

That's what Jesus offers us.

That's what the gospel is about—
it entails forgiveness and restoration—
our sin is washed clean
and our hearts are renewed—
he changes us from the inside.
His purpose is to replicate himself in us—
such that we display his character in our lives.

Isn't that a good thing—a beautiful thing?

Christianity is not a self-help program of moral transformation—
it is a work of God transforming sinful, self-centered hearts
into hearts and lives that share his own life.

So what is really distinctive about a Christian—

what makes a Christian visible in the world--
ought not to be some trivial outward sign--
like a bumper sticker
or a piece of jewelry,
but instead, it ought to be an expression of Christ-like character
that flows from a pure heart,
which has been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The marks of a Christian must be love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

We mustn't let our Christian traditions, whatever they may be,
obscure this central reality.

I hope that someone you work with every day

is not surprised to discover that you are a Christian.

I trust you will display something of that changed heart

that displays an authentic experience of the gospel.

Prayer—

Prov. 4:23--"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."

Closing Song: *#138 Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Benediction:

Acts 20:32 "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace,

which can build you up

and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

Dec. 15, 2019

**"Misperceptions of Jesus--
Jesus: The Breaker of Tradition"**

Matt. 15:1-20

"Hand washing" may seem like a trivial matter to us, but in Jesus' day it was a sign of one's patriotic and religious loyalties. In response to the charge laid against him, Jesus addresses two key issues that remain significant for us today—religious authority and religious authenticity.

I. What is Our Supreme Authority?

Human Traditions

vs.

The Word of God

II. What is Authentic Religion?

Empty Ritual

vs.

Heart Response

Our need;
God's provision in the gospel.

Sermon Response:

**"Misperceptions of Jesus--
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Matt. 15:1-20

•When does a specific human application of a divine command become a tradition? What examples of "evangelical traditions" can you think of--traditions that are sometimes treated like divine commands?

•Why do we establish traditions? How can traditions be beneficial? When do they become harmful? Ask God to help you sort through these benefits and hindrances of tradition in your life.

•Read vv. 7,8. What does it mean to honor God with your heart? Is that merely an emotional response? Does it also involve our will and even our outward actions? Ask God to change your heart today.

•Read v. 19. What does this say about the natural condition of the human heart? Do you think this describes your own heart? Why? Why not?

•If all of these things that come out of a man's heart make him unclean, what can make him clean?

•Take time to pray—that our hearts may be changed by the power of God, and our lives may reflect the character of Christ.