

Jesus Teachings about Justice

Matthew 15:1-9
SS Lesson for 06/17/2018

Devotional Scripture: Amos 5:18-24

OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW AND KEY VERSE OF THE LESSON

Key Verse: Matt 15:8

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

LESSON INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

JESUS CONFRONTED BY ACCUSATIONS (MATT 15:1-2)

Accusations from the scribes and Pharisees (1)

Accusations of subverting the government (Luke 23:2)

Accusations of criminal activities (John 18:29-30)

Accusations of breaking the law (John 19:7)

Accusations of disloyalty by Pilate (John 19:12)

Accusations based on man's traditions (2)

Beware of traditions based on principles of the world (Col 2:8)

Treasure those things that are based on the promises of God (1 Pet 1:18-19)

Even if traditions are based on Scripture, interpretation must be from God (John 5:39-42)

Once tradition has been validated by God, be steadfast in it (Deut 5:32-33)

JESUS RESPONDS BY REBUKING (MATT 15:3-9)

Rebuke of disobedience (3-4)

Disobedience that comes from the influence of Satan (Eph 2:1-3)

Disobedience of being deceptive (Eph 5:6)

Disobedience that should not even be mentioned (Eph 5:12)

Disobedience through actions that display the denial of God (Titus 1:15-16)

Disobedience that will receive just punishment (Heb 2:2)

Disobedience that keeps one from entering God's rest (Heb 4:6)

Rebuke of hypocrisy (5-7)

Hypocrisy through having a form of godliness (2 Tim 3:5)

Hypocrisy through legalism (Gal 6:13)

Hypocrisy through stories (2 Peter 2:3)

Hypocrisy through appealing to human lusts (2 Peter 2:18)

Hypocrisy through promises (2 Peter 2:19)

Rebuke of vain worship (8-9)

Vain worship that is not done in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24)

Vain worship by those that do not keep a tight rein on the tongue (James 1:26)

Vain worship by worshipping idols (Ps 97:7)

Vain worship is not accepted by God (Isaiah 29:13)

Vain worship is when there is no listening to God (Eccles. 5:1)

Vain worship is not putting lessons learned into action (Ezekiel 33:31)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM ALLEN ROSS

The Analysis of the Passage

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

PRACTICAL POINTS FROM THE BIBLE EXPOSITOR AND ILLUMINATOR COMMENTARY

Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson explores **Jesus Teachings about Justice** and hypocrisy. The **study's aim** is to show that God wants our hearts, not just our words. The **study's application** is to think and act according to God's Word and His justice, not man's.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Matt 15:8

These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

15:1-9 (Mark 7:1-13). News of Jesus' teaching and His mighty acts had spread throughout the land. The officials in **Jerusalem** were aware of all **Jesus** was doing, for a delegation arrived in Galilee **from** Jerusalem to interrogate Jesus over a matter of Jewish **tradition**. Their attack was directed against Jesus' **disciples**, who were accused of failing to observe the elders' tradition of the ceremonial washing of **hands before** eating. This tradition (Rabbinic, not Mosaic) was an elaborate washing ritual involving not only one's hands but also cups, pitchers, and kettles (Mark 7:3-4). **Jesus** immediately took the offensive against the religious leaders and asked **why** they continued to **break the direct command of God**. He cited the fifth commandment concerning honoring one's **father and mother** (Matt. 15:4; Ex. 20:12). The Jews considered honoring of parents so important that anyone who cursed **his** parents was to **be put to death** (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9). Jesus showed how these religious leaders had in effect nullified this commandment (Matt. 15:6). They could simply affirm that a particular item had been **a gift devoted to God**. Then the item could not be used by an individual but was kept separate. This was simply a clever way of keeping things from passing to one's parents. The person would of course continue to keep those things in his own home where they had been supposedly set aside for God. Such action was condemned by Jesus as being hypocritical (v. 7), for while it appeared to be spiritual, it actually was done to keep one's possessions for himself. Thus this failure to help one's parents deliberately violated the fifth commandment of the Decalogue. Such action had been described by **Isaiah** centuries before (Isa. 29:13). Their religion had become a matter of action and man-made rules. **Their hearts** were **far from** God and consequently their **worship** was **in vain** (*matēn*, "fruitless, futile," an adjective used only here [Matt. 15:9] and in the parallel passage, Mark 7:7; it is a variation of the more common adjective *mataios*, "without results, futile").

15:10-20 (Mark 7:14-23). Jesus then turned and warned **the crowd** against the religious leaders' teachings. He said a man is not defiled by what goes **into his mouth**, but rather his defiled condition is evidenced by **what comes out of his mouth**. The Pharisees were wrong in thinking their washings kept them spiritually clean. **The disciples** reported to Jesus **that the Pharisees were offended** (cf. Matt. 13:21, 57) by what He had just said, sensing that His words were directed against them. Jesus added that since the Pharisees had **not** been **planted** by His **heavenly Father** (another of the many times in Matt. where Jesus referred to God as "Father"), they were headed for uprooting (judgment). Jesus said to **leave them** alone, for they had chosen their path and nothing would deter them. **They** were **blind guides**, trying to lead **blind** people; they would **fall into a pit**. **Peter** asked for further clarification about Jesus' teaching (**the parable** refers to Jesus' words in 15:11; cf. Mark 7:15-17). So Jesus enlarged on His previous statement. Defilement of a person does not come from the outside. What comes from the outside is simply passed through the digestive system and is eventually eliminated. **But** what comes **out of the mouth** represents what is actually inside one's **heart**, and these may **make** him (or, show him to be) **unclean** (*koinoi*, "common, ceremonially impure"). **Evil** (*ponēroi* ' **thoughts, murder, adultery** (*moicheiai*), **sexual immorality** (*porneiai*), **theft, false testimony, slander**—such actions and words rise from within one's evil heart. **These matters—not** whether one eats food **with unwashed hands**—reveal spiritual uncleanness.

15:21-28 (Mark 7:24-30). To get away from the questionings of the religious leaders, **Jesus withdrew** from Israel and went north into **the region of Tyre and Sidon**, the Gentile coastal region of Phoenicia. Tyre was 35 miles from Galilee and Sidon was 60. There He met **a Canaanite woman**. Centuries earlier that area's inhabitants were called Canaanites (Num. 13:29). She pleaded with Him to **have mercy** on her demon-possessed **daughter**. She addressed Him as **Lord, Son of David** (cf. Matt. 9:27; 20:30-31), a messianic title. But even that appeal could not help her, for the timing was not appropriate. When **Jesus** failed to **answer** her and she persisted with her appeal, **the disciples... urged** Jesus to **send her away**. They

seemed to be asking, “Lord, why don’t You go ahead and help this woman? She isn’t going to give up until You do.” Jesus reminded them, **I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel** (cf. 10:6). He had come to offer to His own people the kingdom promised through David centuries before. Thus it was inappropriate for Him to bring blessings on Gentiles before blessings fell on Israel. But **the woman** was not easily discouraged. She saw in Jesus the only chance for help for her child. On her knees she pleaded, **Lord, help me!** Jesus’ reply caused her to realize her position, for He said **it would not be right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs**. He was picturing a family gathered at mealtime around a table, eating food provided by the head of the household. The Gentile woman saw herself in this picture. She was not a child in the family (of Israel) eligible for the choicest morsels of food. But she saw herself as a household dog (a Gentile; the Jews often called Gentiles “dogs”) eligible to receive **crumbs that might fall from the master’s table**. She was not wanting to deprive Israel of God’s blessings. She was simply asking that some of the blessing be extended to her in her need. In light of such **great faith** (cf. 8:10), the kind of faith Jesus was looking for in Israel, He **granted her request. Her daughter was healed... that very hour**. This Gentile woman’s faith contrasted with Israel’s leaders who were rejecting Jesus.

15:29-39 (Mark 7:31-8:10). Jesus, returning from Tyre and Sidon, **went near the Sea of Galilee... into the hills** (cf. Matt. 14:23) where He **sat down**. **Great crowds** of people brought a multitude of sick people **to Him**. In view of Mark 7:31-37, the crowds referred to in Matthew 15:30-31 may have been Gentiles (also cf. Mark 8:13 with Matt. 15:39). Jesus **healed** their physical illnesses, and people **praised the God of Israel**. Jesus was thus demonstrating what He will do for Gentiles as well as for Jews when His rightful millennial rule will be established on earth. This ministry lasted about **three days**. Jesus had **compassion for them** (*splanchnizomai*; cf. 9:36; Luke 7:13). He did **not want to send them** home without food. The **disciples** questioned how **in this remote place** (cf. Matt. 14:15) they could buy **enough food to feed** them all. When Jesus asked them about their present resources, they said they had **seven bread loaves and a few small fish**. The disciples must have anticipated that Jesus was going to use them again to feed this multitude, as He had done earlier (14:13-21). Jesus **told the crowd to sit down**, gave **thanks for the seven loaves and the fish**, and divided the food among **the disciples**, who distributed it **to the people**. After the crowd—estimated this time at **4,000 men, besides women and children**—**ate and were satisfied... seven basketfuls of broken pieces were picked up**. This miracle demonstrated that the Lord’s blessings through His disciples would fall not only on Israel (14:13-21) but also on Gentiles. This is perhaps most clearly seen in Acts 10-11 when Peter shared the good news of salvation with Cornelius and his Gentile household. **After Jesus had dismissed the crowd**, He returned to the western shore of the Sea of Galilee to the city of **Magadan**, a variant spelling of Magdala, just north of Tiberias. Mary Magdalene (Matt. 27:56) was from Magdala, also called Dalmanutha (Mark 8:10).

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

Our text comes in the midst of a conversation between the Lord and strict, law-keeping, religious Jews (scribes and Pharisees). On the surface it seems like an argument that is of little concern to us today. It concerned the practice of washing hands before partaking of bread (Matt. 15:2). But there is a deeper issue to explore, namely hypocrisy, the practice of pretending to be close to God by means of external religious deeds alone (vs. 9). What we see in this text is that God is not fooled by our facades. To be rightly related and pleasing to God, we must respond to Him with our hearts. The Lord pointed out the danger of drawing near to God just with our mouths. In this text, these religious people were attempting to demonstrate some kind of godliness through words without any change of heart. With unerring insight, the Lord pointedly informed them that, despite their pious words, their actions toward their own parents had obliterated the fifth commandment (Matt. 15:3-6). Undoubtedly, they were stunned as the Lord showed them their hypocrisy. On earth we often think we have other people fooled, but no one can fool God. So we come to the central concern of our text, which is the heart. These religious Jews had hearts that were far from God, despite their outward religiosity. They had made a shallow accusation against the Lord’s disciples (Matt. 15:2). They obsessed over external religious deeds, but the real concern, the heart, was overlooked. This is what we want to take away from this text. God looks at the heart (I Sam. 16:7). What we need most in life is a new heart, one washed clean through faith in Jesus Christ. We need a circumcision that is deeper than our skin, one that penetrates our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 2:29). What God desires of us is a broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). So it is all about the heart. In our hearts we plan, think, and determine our course of action. God wants our hearts in line with Him. They must be soft, humble, and conformed to the Word of God. The words that we speak, though very important, are very often a source of pretense, false profession, and hypocritical posturing in this world. It is tempting to fall into this. Our world suffers from an epidemic of hypocrisy. We see falsehoods and posturing from those running for high offices all the way

down to children bragging on the school playground. It is easy to talk and bluster and position oneself to be thought of in a certain way. The teaching of the Bible is that God is just, and He sees through all pretense right to the heart. Consequently, His evaluation of us is perfect, thorough, and deep. We must not withhold our hearts from Him but allow Him to shape and mold our inner selves. Then we can respond to Him in a righteous way—not with mere outward "sacrifices" but with our hearts—honest, humble, and obedient hearts.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Public figures sometimes find themselves defending controversial or offensive statements. Often their defense is to say, "I was misquoted." Of course, our experience with the media shows that they are in some cases right. We who are not celebrities know the frustration of being misquoted. Parents hear their children twist their words to use against them. Angry spouses sometimes do the same. On the job, a worker claims to be following instructions while the boss insists that those instructions were misunderstood. Misquoting, misunderstanding, misremembering, or just ignoring other people's words is a common cause of conflict. When we are misquoted and misunderstood, we want to shout, "That's not what I meant, and you should know that!" We value our words and their integrity. We become exasperated when we are misunderstood, and we become discouraged at the hard feelings that often follow. God experiences misunderstanding as well. Some of the Bible's sternest messages are directed at those who have received God's Word but have misunderstood and misapplied it. They claim devotion to God, but their actions reveal more interest in their own will than in his. Today's lesson features one of God's stern messages. We study it to ensure that we do not resemble the group against which it was originally directed.

Jesus was confronted often by Pharisees and teachers of the law, or scribes, during his earthly ministry. Of the four Gospels, the frequency of their mention together in Matthew is fully equal to the other three Gospels combined. Teachers of the law/scribes were experts in the Law of Moses and the traditions about its application. In Jesus' time, these learned men could quote large sections of Scripture and could cite the opinions of renowned experts on interpretation. Pharisees took a distinct approach to the Law of Moses. Their movement arose about 150 years before Jesus' birth, in response to what many saw as the corruption of the high priesthood in the temple at Jerusalem. Pharisees believed that God would restore his blessing on Israel only when Israel kept God's law faithfully. To ensure that people kept the law, the Pharisees developed many traditions that had the effect of building a fence around it. The idea was that if the traditions were followed, then a person wouldn't even come close to breaking some part of God's law. To illustrate, Pharisees might teach that to avoid taking God's name in vain (and thus violate Exodus 20:7), one should play it safe by not uttering his name under any circumstances whatsoever. Among these add-on traditions was a custom of washing hands before meals. Today we wash hands before eating as a means of hygiene. For the Pharisees, the custom was not an issue of physical hygiene but ceremonial religious washing. The Law of Moses required priests to wash their hands and feet before performing tabernacle duties (Exodus 30:17-21). The Pharisees seem to have built a fence around this law by expecting every faithful Israelite to perform a similar ceremonial washing before every meal; this treated meals as though they were acts of worship in the temple. To eat without having performed this ceremonial washing was to eat unclean food. While Christians today often think of Pharisees as evil because of their opposition to Jesus, in his day they were highly respected. We should also remember that not all Pharisees opposed Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who desired a private meeting with Jesus (John 3:1, 2) and later assisted in his burial (19:38-42). A number of Pharisees became Christians, though some still struggled with their understanding of the Law of Moses and its application to Christians of Gentile background (Acts 15:3-6). Most notable of the Christian Pharisees was the apostle Paul. Years after his conversion, he continued to refer to himself as a Pharisee (23:6).

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Note: Outline and points copied from previous SS Lesson dated 05/18/2014

Jesus Confronted by Accusations (Matt 15:1-2)

1 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."

Accusations from the scribes and Pharisees (1)

Accusations of subverting the government (Luke 23:2)

2 And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king."

Accusations of criminal activities (John 18:29-30)

29 So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?" 30 "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."

Accusations of breaking the law (John 19:7)

7 The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."

Accusations of disloyalty by Pilate (John 19:12)

12 From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

Accusations based on man's traditions (2)

Beware of traditions based on principles of the world (Col 2:8)

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Treasure those things that are based on the promises of God (1 Pet 1:18-19)

18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

Even if traditions are based on Scripture, interpretation must be from God (John 5:39-42)

39 You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me to have life. 41 "I do not accept praise from men, 42 but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts.

Once tradition has been validated by God, be steadfast in it (Deut 5:32-33)

32 So be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. 33 Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.

Jesus Responds by Rebuking (Matt 15:3-9)

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.'

5 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.' "

Rebuke of disobedience (3-4)

Disobedience that comes from the influence of Satan (Eph 2:1-3)

2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

Disobedience of being deceptive (Eph 5:6)

6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

Disobedience that should not even be mentioned (Eph 5:12)

12 For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.

Disobedience through actions that display the denial of God (Titus 1:15-16)

15 To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. 16 They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.

Disobedience that will receive just punishment (Heb 2:2)

2 For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment,

Disobedience that keeps one from entering God's rest (Heb 4:6)

6 It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience.

Rebuke of hypocrisy (5-7)

Hypocrisy through having a form of godliness (2 Tim 3:5)

5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

Hypocrisy through legalism (Gal 6:13)

13 Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.

Hypocrisy through stories (2 Peter 2:3)

3 In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.

Hypocrisy through appealing to human lusts (2 Peter 2:18)

18 For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error.

Hypocrisy through promises (2 Peter 2:19)

19 They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity — for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.

Rebuke of vain worship (8-9)

Vain worship that is not done in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24)

21 Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

Vain worship by those that do not keep a tight rein on the tongue (James 1:26)

26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

Vain worship by worshipping idols (Ps 97:7)

7 All who worship images are put to shame, those who boast in idols — worship him, all you gods!

Vain worship is not accepted by God (Isaiah 29:13)

13 The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.

Vain worship is when there is no listening to God (Eccles. 5:1)

5 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

Vain worship is not putting lessons learned into action (Ezekiel 33:31)

31 My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Concluding Thoughts from Allen Ross

The Analysis of the Passage

I. Challenge and Response: In response to the challenge by the teachers about the disciples' violation of their traditions, Jesus rebuked the teachers for their hypocrisy (15:1-9). I put this first part together because it is essentially Jesus' response to the charge of the teachers. For easier study purposes, it can be further broken down into sections:

First, the accusation (1, 2). The men who bring the accusation are from Jerusalem, meaning that they were the best trained and most highly respected teachers in the land. They also had a good deal of zeal to be this far away from home. Their appearance here must be a deputation or mission of some kind. Whatever the reason for their presence, they were the source of the most direct confrontation and personal attack that Jesus had to endure.

Their attack came because of the activities of the disciples (but see, the disciples were doing what Jesus did [Luke 11:37-41]). The whole section is abbreviated, more so than in Mark, because Matthew is a Jew writing to a Jewish audience. They know what all this means. Matthew does not list all the array of Pharisaical traditions (see Mark 7:1-3), but focuses on the one critical issue.

The point of their accusation is telling: Jesus and his disciples had violated the “traditions of the elders” (Mark: “tradition of men”), as if those traditions were now authoritative and could be sinned against. These traditions were still oral in Jesus’ days, but were written down a couple of centuries later. The traditions about washing would be found in the tractate called *Yadayim* or “Hands” (see *Mishnah Yadayim* 2:1). What this means is that the traditions of men had been elevated to the status of Scripture, so that one could be guilty of violating them. By the way, the same problem exists today as many groups have their “biblical” views, and to violate them means criticism or expulsion from the group. But some of those views are applications and not what the Bible actually teaches.

Second, the Rebuke of Jesus (3-9). The reply of Jesus is more a counterattack than a reply to their question. He first accuses them of breaking the commands of God in order to keep their traditions. This puts the issue back to them—they were the sinners, not Jesus and his disciples, because they had broken God’s commands and not just some teachings of elders.

To press his point he reminds them of their tradition of getting around the law of God. They could pronounce a vow on their things with the word, “*Korban*,” meaning it is a gift (see tractate *Nedarim* in the Mishnah, chapters 1, 9, 11). The word “*Korban*” is based on the word in Leviticus for bringing something near to God. If because of greed, for example, a man did not want to help support his aging parents, he would announce “*Korban*.” That would mean the money was frozen, and could not be used for taking care of the parents. Thus, they could use their traditions to get out of taking care of their father and mother (which the Law required). Then, they might find a way of nullifying the vow so they ended up keeping the money. A clever tradition of swearing or taking oaths had grown up as a way around a clear cut teaching of the word of God.

This, Jesus says, is hypocritical, and thus they fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah. Here is the first place that He called them hypocrites. Here he quotes Isaiah 29:13, which was clearly addressed to the prophet’s own audience. But by quoting it Jesus was saying that his generation was doing the same thing as Isaiah’s generation, and so the words are also addressed to this generation. In both contexts, Isaiah and Matthew, the people spoken to are Jews from Jerusalem who had a religion that was characterized by externals that often crowded out truths. The Jews in Jesus’ day were just preserving the spirit of the folks in Isaiah’s day. They said all the right things, giving the impression they were pious; but their hearts and wills were not obedient at all (they would not honor father and mother, for one example). They had a religious form, but not the reality that goes with it. So their teaching was in vain because there was nothing of God’s authority behind them.

The quotation from Isaiah generally follows the shorter form of the verse found in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. The point is very clear: Jesus was saying to his audience what Isaiah said to his, that their worship was vain because they were far from God in their hearts.

II. Teaching: Jesus explained to the crowd that what went into a man’s mouth did not make him unclean, but what came forth (15:10,11). The Old Testament had a lot to say about clean and unclean (for which see the discussions in commentaries or in word study books). Everything was classified as either clean or unclean, and what was unclean was not allowed in the temple. So defilements, diseases, sins, contaminations, discharges and the like made a person unclean. The Pharisees were rigid in observing the laws of cleanness as well as the sabbath observances and the tithes. In the process they were so concerned with the outward observance of these defilements and contacts with things unclean that they failed to realize that the real defilement was sin. The diseases, discharges, and defilements that made a person unclean were things in life that were the result of the presence of sin and death. To observe the outward rituals and miss the connection with sin was a waste of time. The real source of uncleanness was the human heart, as Jesus will say shortly. To harbor sin (such as hatred and murder for Jesus) and wash hands with ritual washing was hypocritical.

In essence, then, the sayings of Jesus here agree with Mark’s conclusion in his account that Jesus was saying all foods were clean. The ceremonial laws, including the dietary laws, were given to keep Israel distinct from the nations, but in the coming of the Messiah the believers from the nations would be united with believing Israel in the new covenant. Here Jesus would address the real source of uncleanness, which got to the heart of the matter. They were holding to externals and missed the real spirit of the law and the reason for the washing.

III. Question and Answer: Jesus answer’s the disciples’ question about his treatment of the Pharisees by stating that they were blind guides (15:12-20). The question of the disciples showed that the Pharisees must have understood what Jesus had said and taken offence at it. The people held these teachers in high regard, and so the disciples were worried that Jesus was too hard on them. They wanted to be exactly clear on what Jesus had said and meant that offended them; and Jesus wanted them to be clear on the unreliability of the Pharisees’ teaching. The basic issue was their misunderstanding of the Law—they dwelt on the externals as the source of

uncleanness and did not realize that the source of the defilements was sin in the world, so uncleanness originated in the human heart.

In short: the human heart produced sin, and sin brought the curse, and the curse brought disease, defilement and death. God legislated rituals to deal with the defilements and the death as a way of reminding Israel of the fact that they were defiled by sin. And Jesus often healed people as a way of showing that He could deal with the cause of the sickness, sin, as well as the results.

To answer the disciples Jesus used a couple of images. The first was that any plant that the Father had not planted would be rooted up (v. 13). The image comes from the Old Testament again that pictures true Israel, the covenant believers, as God's planting (see Isa. 5:1-7). Jesus was not saying that false teaching would be rooted out, but false teachers. In other words, the Pharisees are not part of God's planting. This is a theme that gets clearer and clearer in the book.

The second image is that the teachers of Israel saw themselves as guides for the blind (as Isaiah described the ignorant people of the land; Isa. 42:18). But Jesus says that these leaders were blind themselves, and so blind leaders of the blind, and both would fall into a pit. The leaders were blind because they failed to understand the Scriptures that they taught, and so majored on externals and missed the reality. And, since they were so weak in spiritual understanding, they also failed to perceive who Jesus was and failed to follow Him—that is the ultimate spiritual blindness (see John 5:39-40). Therefore, as leaders they will lead people away from Christ, because they do not rightly discern the Scriptures.

The disciples have faith in Jesus, but are still weak in their understanding of all that Jesus taught. So Peter asked the meaning of the parable mentioned in verse 11, and the disciples' failure to understand shocked Jesus: "Are you so dull," meaning, "Are you still without understanding?" This question draws greater attention to their failure to understand.

So Jesus explains in some detail what it is that defiles a person. What someone eats goes in the mouth and is cast out into a latrine eventually. That in one sense is eventually unclean, either the wrong foods being eaten, or what is excreted. But Jesus is saying that the real issue is not what enters the mouth but what comes out, because that comes from the heart. And what are the products of the heart or will? — murder, anger, immorality, etc. (following generally the order of the latter commandments). The point that Jesus is making is that it is what a person actually is that brings defilement. The external laws of cleanness and uncleanness if properly understood to reflect the effects of sin in the world were helpful for a devout Israelite to avoid the impurities as a way of following a life of purity. But as is so often the case, it was easier to focus on the external rituals and forget the spiritual reality behind them. Jesus is teaching that true religion must deal with the true nature of men and women, not just the outer performances. The teachers would have known this if they had been concerned about inner purity.

Jesus finally ends this teaching by saying that eating with unwashed hands does not make a man unclean, but what comes from the heart does. This is a radical departure from not only the traditions of the elders but also the details of the Law. But Jesus has already made it clear (see Matt. 5:21-48) that He has fulfilled the Law, and therefore whatever the laws teach must be determined by their relationship to Him. Not only had Jesus rejected the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law as the authentic teachers of his day, but he had assumed that role for himself—he is the teacher. The conflict between what he was teaching and what the traditions of the Jews taught would come to a head later. But now that the Messiah has come and fulfilled the Law, every detail of the Law has to be seen in that way, in the light of the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Him. And that usually means that the external regulations of the Law are no longer binding, but what it revealed about God and about His will are. After all, the spirit of the Law was to develop righteousness, not to provide a number of binding external regulations. Jesus was more concerned that people understand that to develop righteousness they would have to be transformed in their hearts so that they would produce righteousness and not uncleanness. Washing hands, therefore, ceased to be a significance step in that direction when the heart was unclean. And the only way that people could be transformed in their hearts was to turn to Jesus as Lord and Savior and find forgiveness. But the Jewish teachers would have none of that.

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/22-jesus-and-traditions-elders-matthew-151-20>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

As Jesus continued his teaching on this occasion, he told his disciples that what comes out of a person's mouth makes the person clean or unclean, not the food that goes into a person (Matthew 15:10, 11). This teaching became vitally important to the church after Jesus' resurrection. As the gospel was shared with Gentiles, who did not keep Israel's laws of clean and unclean foods (let alone the handwashing tradition), the church struggled to maintain unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jesus' teaching reminded everyone that obedience to the God who had given his Spirit to the Gentiles meant uniting with them in fellowship around the dinner table (compare Galatians 2:12, 13). All people and all foods had become clean (Mark 7:18, 19; Acts 10:9-16, 28). Jesus' encounters with the teachers of the law and Pharisees continued after the incident in today's text. As Jesus' death approached, he delivered a stinging rebuke of them (Matthew 23:1-36). They made a show of their devotion because they cared more about people's opinions than about honoring God. They looked righteous on the outside, but inside was spiritual filth. Most of all, the Pharisees prevented others from finding God's blessing in Jesus. By extolling themselves and their traditions, they drew people away from the one whom God had sent to make them clean inside and out. Because they claimed to be teachers of God's people but in fact worked against God's purpose, Jesus criticized them severely. Jesus saw in his time what Isaiah had seen in his: people who claimed to be faithful to God but whose primary devotion was to human traditions and institutions. That should make us realize how easy it is to do the same in any time and place. It is easy to point the finger of condemnation at others whom we believe to be hypocrites. But we do well to realize that the same may be true of us. Our true devotion may be not to God but to human traditions—forms of worship, rules of behavior, or teachings of our favorite preachers. That misplaced devotion may prevent us from reckoning with our need for God's cleansing, to be made truly clean not by what people see on the outside but by what Christ does to us on the inside. Only after we are cleansed within can God's love flow out of us to a world that badly needs it.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. When people's hearts are not surrendered to Jesus, they often focus on ungodly things (Matt. 15:1-2)
2. Before questioning the motives of others, we should examine our own motives (vs. 3)
3. We show our love for God when we honor our parents (vs. 4)
4. Causes and traditions should never come before the care of our families (vss. 5-6)
5. Our motives are more important to God than what we say (Matt. 15:7-8; cf. 1 Sam. 16:7)
6. Worship is meaningless if it is for the purpose of pleasing men (Matt. 15:9)