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By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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Matthew 15:1–20
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“The King and His Kingdom!”

Matthew 15:1-20

“Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² “Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” ³ He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” ⁶ he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

*⁸ “This people honors Me with their lips,
but their heart is far from Me;*

⁹ in vain do they worship Me,

teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”

¹⁰ And He called the people to Him and said to them, “Hear and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” ¹² Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were

offended when they heard this saying?"¹³ He answered, "Every plant that My heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up."¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."¹⁵ But Peter said to Him, "Explain the parable to us."¹⁶ And He said, "Are you also still without understanding?¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled?¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander."²⁰ These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."

Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us the Scriptures and making us Your people. You have brought us to this amazing Gospel to learn more about your Son, Jesus. May we not be as the Pharisees, hypocrites who judge others, thinking we are above correction, as we are so prone to do. We want to listen to our own hearts instead of Yours. So by Your Spirit open this Gospel to us and help us to see Jesus. Give us the desire to learn from You this morning. This morning, in the name of Jesus we ask you to change our hearts, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: "There's something disturbing inside the man."¹

This past summer there was a big sports story that relates directly to the issues that we find in our text this morning. The story involved Riley Cooper, a star receiver for the Philadelphia Eagles football team. Apparently, in July, Cooper went to a Kenny Chesney concert, got incredibly drunk, was denied backstage access at the concert, and used a racial slur to refer to the bouncers who kept him out. Unknown to him at the time, another fan took out his phone and videoed the whole incident and then posted it to YouTube. Cooper couldn't deny what he said, since it was captured on video and millions of people saw it. And he got in all sorts of trouble. He has since apologized and was fined by the Eagles. He was excused from team activities for a number of days and ordered to seek counseling and sensitivity training. He was ridiculed and humiliated.

On one level, this sort of thing happens all the time, but usually it doesn't involve a professional football player. However, this time it did and because of this incident, Riley Cooper had to endure a huge amount of media scrutiny, which is unpleasant at best. Part of that media scrutiny was an article in Sports Illustrated by the noted football writer Peter King, which really struck home with me. As he reflected on this sad incident, Peter King observed, "Cooper is a fighter and a guy who lives hard. But there hasn't been any sign that he's a racist to anyone on the team. **There's something disturbing inside the man.** And if he's being honest, he wants to learn why such a vile thing came out of him a few months ago."

Listen to those words again, "**There's something disturbing inside the man.**" And, of course, that's true. To have such words come out of Cooper's mouth, unprovoked, fueled by alcohol, signals a deeper issue. But if we're not careful, we can find ourselves suggesting that somehow what's inside Riley Cooper **is unusual**. We find ourselves thinking that having something disturbing inside of us, which leads to vile words coming out of our mouths, **is unusual**.

¹ The Introduction and part of the Conclusion are adapted from the sermon, "What Can Wash Away My Sin?" by Dr. Sean Michael Lucas, First Presbyterian Church, Hattiesburg, MS, 8/12/13, www.sermonaudio.com.

Now you can say, “That’s different, that what people like **him** do, but the rest of **us** aren’t like that. **We’re** much more pure. The rest of **us** don’t have disturbing things like that going on inside of **us**. The rest of **us** are **better angels**. People like **him** are **vile**. People like **us** are pure. ...” And that’s exactly the mindset of these Pharisees in today’s passage, **Matthew 15:1–20**, which deals with the subject of **hypocrisy**.

You see, the Pharisees divided the world into two groups — People like him are **unclean**. People like us are **clean**. People like him are **profane**, people like us are **holy**. We’re on the side of the clean, the pure, and the holy. Why aren’t **you on our side**? And to them Jesus says, verse 7, “**You Hypocrites!**” And here we see that Jesus challenges hypocrisy just as boldly as He challenges other kinds of sins. And He challenges hypocrisy with three different groups.

And the first encounter we see is with ...

v. 1–9: JESUS AND THE PHARISEES ²

“Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² ‘Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.’ ³ He answered them, ‘And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, ‘What you would have gained from me is given to God,’ ⁶ he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ⁸ ‘‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; ⁹ in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”

We live in an anti-traditional age. What’s new is good. That why on all your detergents it says ‘new and improved.’ You wouldn’t ever buy a detergent box that said ‘old and unimproved.’ It’s all new and improved. And so it’s not the tendency of our culture to preserve everything that came about in the past. Nevertheless, this passage has important lessons for us ... because this tendency towards the development of **unbiblical traditions** began in a time just like ours. And the first important lesson Jesus wants us to learn about is the nature of manmade traditions. In these verses, you see a picture of man-made traditions, and then you see Jesus’ response to and His verdict about them.

What do we do when we come to one of these passages where we see Jesus arguing with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes, the teachers of the law ... all the people we would call religious elites today? So often, when you look at these arguments, it’s so easy to say, “Well, this isn’t very relevant today. It’s ancient stuff. Who cares about the cleanliness laws, the ceremonial washings, and all the rituals the Jews observed? Who cares about that stuff anymore?” But you have to realize that Jesus never argued unnecessarily. Jesus never debated something that wasn’t important. Every time Jesus engaged His enemies, there was some profound principle at stake. And that’s just what we have here.

2 The Exposition of the text is adapted from the books, *The Reformed Expository Commentary: Matthew, Volume 2* by Dr. Dan Doriani, pages 37-45; and *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1* by Dr. James Montgomery Boice, pages 279–286; **And the Sermons, “*With a Religious Crowd*” by Dr. Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, 2/16/97, sermons.redeemer.com; Logos Bible Software 4: *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*; “*Tradition or Commandment*” 8/23/98 and “*Out of the Heart Comes Evil*” 8/9/98, both by Dr. J. Ligon Duncan, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, www.fpcjackson.org.**

In this first section, we're introduced to the fact that we all have a deep sense of spiritual uncleanness, of moral defilement, and that's what we see in the first few verses. The Pharisees were very upset because Jesus' disciples didn't wash before they ate. We read in verse 2, "*Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.*" Now let's see why this is an important issue. Now I want you to understand the nature of this charge that the Pharisees were bringing against Jesus' disciples. They were **not** charging Jesus with being, as it were, a bad mother who didn't have her children wash their hands before a meal. They are not bringing a charge of **bad hygiene**.

In the tradition of the elders, there was a great concern for obedience to certain stipulations of the ceremonial law in the Old Testament. One of those stipulations says that if you were to come into contact with something that was unclean, then you were unfit to worship the living God. You had to go through a purification rite before you were again ready to worship the Lord.

Now, somewhere along the line the Pharisees decided, you know, you may be going through a marketplace and you might accidentally pick up unclean food. You might accidentally touch it. Or you might be going through the marketplace and you might accidentally brush by a Gentile — a filthy, unbelieving Gentile. And so before you come to sit down for a meal, you've been defiled.

But we've got a solution for that, we've got a remedy for that. We're going to institute this new practice, the practice of ceremonial washing so before the meal you have water poured over your hands, and therefore, if you've been accidentally unclean or touched someone unclean, you'll have been ceremonially washed, and be able to eat the meal. But the disciples weren't doing that. They weren't ritually washing their hands, and the Pharisees basically say, "Jesus, do you realize what a bad example these people are setting for all the other godly people in Israel? They're not following the traditions of the elders in Israel."

So the issue then was the Pharisees were very strict about holding to the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, in particular the cleanliness laws. Now when you read the cleanliness laws in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, they're really quite confusing and they seem so unnecessary. There are lots of them, and I'll just give you the basic gist of what they mean. In the Old Testament, you weren't allowed to go into the temple to worship God if you'd been in contact with dirt, disease, or decay. For example, the priests had to wash their hands and feet before they came into the sanctuary. If you touched any dead animal or dead person, you couldn't go into the tabernacle to worship God for a week. If you had an infectious skin disease ... If you were bleeding or your body produced pus in response to some sort of infection, you couldn't go worship. In other words, if you had some relationship to dirt, disease, or decay, you couldn't go in.

And for the first time I realized ... it really began to hit me as I was studying this ... the worshiper in the Old Testament essentially had to have the same relationship to dirt that a doctor has going into surgery today. You'll never see, for example, a doctor going from doing yard work straight into brain surgery. He or she would have to go through the rites of purification. In other words, you'd have to scrub up to go to God in the Old Testament. There had to be all kinds of rites of purification. If you had any contact with decay ... If you had any contact with anything that even **might** be decay or disease or dirt, you had to scrub and scrub and scrub. You had the same relationship, in the Old Testament, to worship as doctors today have to going into surgery.

Why? The point is the cleanliness laws were there to teach something really important. And actually it's easier for us to understand now than it was for them, because we know a lot more about dirt, disease, and decay than the people in those days did. God was saying sin does the same thing **to the soul** that dirt, disease, and decay do **to the body**. Sin defiles the soul the way dirt, disease, and decay defile the body. **Defile**. Now what does that mean? How do dirt, disease, and decay defile the body? Well, very quickly, let me give you three ways.

First of all, dirt, disease, and decay defile the body in the sense that it isolates you. It **alienates** you. If you go onto a Metro car and you see a very poor person there, probably homeless, even if your worldview makes you incredibly, sympathetic to that person, you can't get within 10 feet of him. Why? Because of the smell and all the filthy stuff that's on his clothes. You can't get near. There's hardly a culture in the world that doesn't say, "If you want to meet people, if you want to get close to people, **wash**. Clean up, because dirt defiles you." Of course, infection defiles you. You can't touch something that's infectious. It defiles you, and God is saying **sin** does the very same thing.

Second, what do dirt, disease, and decay do? They eat away at your insides. They're cancerous, literally. Actually, my wife explained this to me a long time ago. I didn't know this, but dirt on your clothes actually makes the clothes wear out faster. If you don't keep your clothes clean, the dirt gets in and wears out the fabric through the friction and so forth. In the same way, disease and decay pull the body apart. It makes the body break down and wear out and God is saying **sin** does the same thing. It makes the soul fall apart. It puts it at war with itself.

And **third**, dirt, disease, and decay discolor, stain, misshape, and disfigure, just like cancer. Just like mildew. What is God saying? God is saying, "Why do you have wars? Why do you have divorce? Why do you have conflicts? Why do you have dissension? Why do you have struggles within your soul? Because of sin. **Sin** is what ails the world." **Sin**, you see, defiles you. It alienates you. It stains you. Now wash.

And so in verses 3 through 9 we see Jesus' reply to these Pharisees. Jesus uses a phrase that parallels the charge that the Pharisees had brought against the disciples. Look at what the Pharisees had said to Jesus' disciples in verse 2, "*Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders?*" Jesus' response to them in verse 3 is, "*And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?*" The Pharisees had attacked His disciples. Jesus responded. The Pharisees had attacked the disciples for breaking the **tradition of the elders**. Jesus responded by saying, "Why do you break the **commandments of God?**" And so in a parallel form, Jesus responds to the Pharisees. And then, starting in verse 4, He compares God's commandment with the teaching of the elders.

God's command is that we honor our parents, that we take care of them in time of need. However, this tradition of the elders, called "This Law of Corban" in the Gospel of Mark, is a very strange thing. I don't understand all of it, but apparently, here's how it works. If your parents who were needy saw something of yours, materially, furniture, money, other resources that might help them in their time of need, they might ask you for them. But if you pronounce that that particular resource was **Corban**, that it was devoted to God, then that gift could be withheld from your parents even though they were in great need. Again, I don't know why such a practice would have developed, and I don't know why moral people decided that such a practice was okay. And Jesus says that by inventing that practice, you've actually circumvented

the whole point of the commandment to honor and care for your parents. And so, He says, by your traditions you have made the word of God null and void.

And He says the reason why they're doing this is because their hearts are not right. And He quotes these words in verse 8, *"This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."* He tells them that they prefer lip service over real worship of the Lord. That their hearts, though they pretend to love the Lord are, in fact, far away from Him. That their worship is empty, it's vain, it's mere form and ritual, and they're following their traditions over God's Word.

Now, having rebuked them, Jesus turns away from the Pharisees, and engages the second group. And so next, we see ...

v. 10–11: JESUS AND THE PEOPLE

¹⁰ *And He called the people to Him and said to them, "Hear and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."*

Now Jesus begins to explain His conversation with the Pharisees to the people. He says, starting at the end of verse 10, *"Hear and understand. It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but it is what is proceeds out of the mouth; this defiles the man."* Jesus is telling us about the nature of true holiness, and He's warning the people about the teachings of the Pharisees. **"Hear and understand"** is a statement designed to warn you that something important is about to be said. Listen closely because something significant is going to be said. Jesus says something that would have absolutely horrified the scribes and the Pharisees. He says, "Moral defilement is more important than ritual defilement." Now these people love the ceremonial law. And what's more, they love all the additions to the law that has been passed down by the Rabbis. And Jesus says, "Moral defilement is more important than ritual defilement."

The implication of Jesus' statement is, by the way, is that He is **abolishing** the ceremonial law for His followers under the covenant. Mark makes that clear in **Mark 7:19**. Mark adds this comment after the passage in which Jesus says that it is not what comes **in from the outside** that defiles you. It is what comes **out from the inside**. Mark adds this phrase, **"Thus He declared all foods clean."** In other words, He's saying that the ceremonial requirement with regard to clean and unclean foods was no longer valid for all the followers of the Lord. This is a very significant moment in redemptive history when Jesus is announcing that the ceremonial law is no longer binding on His people.

Jesus, you see, is aiming for the heart. He's telling us that it's not what's **outside** that makes us holy. It's what's **inside** and deep and profound. It's from the inner man, the mind, the will, the whole person — that's where holiness comes from. It's a holiness that comes from the inside out, and it characterizes all of our lives. That's the kind of holiness that Jesus is looking for in his disciples.

Listen to these words from the great 19th Century commentator, Anglican Bishop J.C. Ryle, "What is the first thing we need in order to be a Christian? A new **heart**. What is the sacrifice God asks us to bring to Him? A broken and a contrite **heart**. What is the true circumcision? The circumcision of the **heart**. What is genuine obedience. To obey from the **heart**. What is saving faith? To believe with the **heart**. Where ought Christ to dwell? To dwell in our **hearts** by faith. What is the chief request that wisdom makes to everyone? My Son, give me your **heart**." The Lord Jesus doesn't want merely superficial holiness in His people. He

wants a transforming holiness from the inside out. And this is what He's saying to the Pharisees. That's not what you're about. You're about a superficial, a ceremonial, a ritual holiness. It's a man-made holiness that's on the outside, but I want my disciples transformed from the inside out. And so He warns the people that it's not the things that enter into them that make them unclean. It's what's on the inside that makes them unclean.

Now, having rebuked the Pharisees and explained inside-out holiness to the people, Jesus turns again and engages the third group. And so finally, we see ...

v. 12–20: JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES

¹² Then the disciples came and said to Him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" ¹³ He answered, "Every plant that My heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵ But Peter said to Him, "Explain the parable to us." ¹⁶ And He said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."

Now Jesus warns His disciples about being too swayed, or too concerned with the Pharisees. And in responding to His disciples, He reminds them of the importance of right doctrine. His disciples come to Him, and they make a clueless comment. This is perhaps, in all the stupid statements of the disciples, the most stupid statement they ever made, verse 12, "*Do you know that the Pharisees were **offended** when they heard this saying?*" Aware of it, He meant it to offend them! That was precisely His purpose to show them that He had no time for their teaching. That it was utterly wrong, that it was not what God taught, and that He was offended by it Himself. Yes, He knew that He had offended the Pharisees.

So He goes on to say, "Let me warn you against being too swayed by what the Pharisees think." He warns them against the Pharisees' teaching, saying, 'God will judge them, for what they're teaching is wrong.' He's telling His disciples that false doctrine kills. It's like the blind leading the blind. **False doctrine leads us into false living.** Jesus is alerting us to the spiritual danger of false teaching by reminding us of its consequences. False teaching leads to judgment by God, and unfortunately, false teaching leads many astray into false ways of living. Bad doctrine leads to bad practice. And so the Lord Jesus is very concerned that His disciples not be affected by the false teaching of the Pharisees.

Now let me note that there's a big difference between the Pharisees and disciples. The Pharisees remained in their spiritual ignorance because they rejected Jesus' teaching and they weren't willing to go to Him and to His word and submit to it. The disciples were brought out of their spiritual ignorance because they went to Christ, confessed their ignorance, and asked Him to instruct them by the word. The Pharisees in their pride will not acknowledge their ignorance and so they remain ignorant. The disciples admit their ignorance and they are instructed in the way of life. That's an important principle for the Christian life.

How do we respond when we come to parts of God's Word that we don't like? Is it our tendency to ignore them, reject them, change them, or is it our tendency to submit to the Word even where we don't understand it and where we don't like it? Is it our tendency to say, "Jesus, you are Lord, I'm ignorant, teach me"? That's a significant lesson for the Christian life. There are a lot of professing Christians today who don't like a lot of things about the Bible and so they

just change them. But that's not the way of the disciple. That's actually the way of the Pharisee. The way of Jesus' disciples is to submit to the authority of His Word and wait for His explanation of the truth. Even in areas we don't like. If we learn no other lesson than that from this passage then we would have learned a very valuable lesson for the Christian life.

But there's more in this passage for us. Jesus makes it clear to Christians that holiness is first and foremost a matter of the heart. Look again at His words, starting at verse 17, "*Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled?*"¹⁸ *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.*" Our mouth is simply an indicator of what's in the heart. What comes out of the mouth is an indicator of what's in there, buried deep in our heart. The heart is the seat of the soul. Heart and soul are thus often used interchangeably in the Bible.

The heart is naturally wicked and it contaminates our life and character. Therefore, the heart must be changed and regenerated before a person can willingly obey God. Salvation begins in the heart by believing reception of the Word of God. While the rejection of that Word hardens the heart. And so Jesus wants us to wage war on sin. But if we're going to do that, we must seek the route and the route is in the heart. It's not in external performance, it's not in outward forms, it's not in rituals or ceremonies. Holiness is not about what we do to the outside. Holiness is about what's happening on the inside, in the heart.

Then Jesus goes on to teach us one more thing in verses 19 and 20, "*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.*"²⁰ *These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.*" He speaks about the source of evil in the heart. And He stresses again that sin is not something that's **superficial**. It's profound. Sin isn't just about individual, isolated, outward actions that can be taken off or taken on, done or undone very easily. Sin is something that's **deep**. It's rooted into the very nature of our souls, our character. And therefore, holiness, if it is going to be profound, is going to have to deal with sin profoundly.

Jesus makes it clear that the source of evil in our lives is not in ritual defilement. And the way He does this is very forceful. You'll notice that He lists what is basically a catalog of sins based on the second table of the Ten Commandments. He starts with murder and He works all the way through false witness and slander. He walks you from the sixth to the tenth commandment. And He says, "Those things don't happen because you ate bad food. Those things happen because your heart is bad."

But none of that applies to us, does it? Or maybe it does?

You see, the big problem in the church is not the Riley Coopers of the world who have something disturbing going on inside them. **It's you. It's me.** We're the ones who have something disturbing going on inside of **us**. Judged by the standard of God's Law as applied to our hearts, we are wretched, we are blind, we are defiled, we are dirty ... because the source of our uncleanness is actually found inside of us, in the very core of who we are. It has to do with our hearts. And that means ... that we can't fix ourselves. We can't wash ourselves. We can't make ourselves clean. Because we can't get inside the real us.

We need someone from outside of us, someone who is pure, someone who is clean, someone who is holy. We need someone outside of us, to get inside of us, and clean us from the inside out. You see, really, the question raised by all these washings, or the problem of our hearts, is simply this, "What can wash away my sin?" And the answer is found in that old Gospel song, "Nothing but the blood of Jesus." **1 Peter 1:18-19** teaches us "*that you were*

ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold,¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.” Jesus is the solution. Jesus is the only solution. Jesus is the only solution for you. Only Jesus can wash away your sin. Only Jesus can change your heart.

Think about that ... You need to pray.
Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

Our Lord and our God, thank You that You have given us a King. In this passage, we see Your Son. Open our eyes that we might see our sin and then see our Savior. Make us people who love Your Word and who have been transformed from the inside out by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. Make us people whose hearts have been changed and whose hearts have been cleansed. And help us to know and believe that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever. Amen.

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Ephesians 1:7-9

“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ .”