

## Matthew 15:1-20

### Review

There's been a huge disruption in our schedules and our lives over the last few weeks caused by Nevan Hopkins' sudden death, but before all that in the evening on the same Sunday that Waylon was baptized and the following Sunday evening, Pastor Brian gave us a high-level overview of the gospel of Matthew and a review of some of the highlights in the first 14 chapters of Matthew that we went through verse-by-verse beginning in 2021.

In preparing ourselves to dive back into our study of Matthew, it is important for us to remember that Matthew was himself a Jew who had become a follower of Jesus after Jesus called him along with His other 11 original disciples. The burden Matthew felt and consequently the thrust and theme of his gospel account was focused on his own people – specifically those who did not yet believe in Jesus' Gospel. Therefore, Matthew is a very important book with which to familiarize ourselves, because our own burden – given to us by Jesus Himself – is to make disciples of all the world. Jesus of course was a Jew Himself – albeit a very special Jew. He is the fulfillment of the prophecies given to the Jews down through history about their promised Messiah (מָשִׁיחַ *mâshîyach*) whom God promised would lead them out of bondage (although for the most part they misunderstood that the bondage God was speaking about in these prophecies was the bondage of sin under which all of us labor, not the bondage of human conquerors).

**NOTE** – The Hebrew word מָשִׁיחַ *mâshîyach* means anointed or anointed one. Recall in the book of 1 Samuel that God allowed Samuel the judge of Israel at the people's request to choose Israel's first king Saul and later King David who established the line of Jewish kings from the tribe of Judah of which Jesus Himself is the final King of Kings. God directed Samuel to anoint the head of the chosen ones with oil. The coming of Jesus the מָשִׁיחַ *mâshîyach* (and His anointing by the woman of sin who washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair in Luke 7:36-50) was the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy spoken by Jacob over his son Judah in his dying blessings of his twelve sons.

***<sup>10</sup>The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,  
until tribute comes to him;  
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.*** Genesis 49:10 (ESV)

In the New Testament Jesus is called by the Greek word **Χριστός *christos*** – transliterated into English as Christ – which also means anointed.

In his review a few weeks ago, Pastor Brian pointed out that the book of Matthew like most ancient Jewish narratives is ordered into five major topical sections rather than being a strictly chronological account. In our previous studies we covered the first two of these sections, and most of the third. Recall that one of the consequences of Jesus' fame following the Sermon on the Mount, and His subsequent healings and teachings was increased conflict with the Jewish leaders of the day. Here in Matthew 15, we see an example of this conflict. Before we begin, take note that these run-ins between Jesus and the Jewish leaders usually began with one or more of the scribes and pharisees trying to discredit Jesus by calling Him out on some part of the Law of Moses they claimed He was violating. In response, Jesus always either led them in an entirely different direction focused more directly on His ministry and fulfillment of prophecy as the Jewish Messiah, or turned the accusation back upon His accusers as He does here in the passage we are studying this evening.

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Let's first take turns reading through the entire passage, and then we'll take a closer look at it verse-by-verse.

***<sup>1</sup>Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,  
<sup>2</sup>“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.”<sup>3</sup>He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?<sup>4</sup>For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’<sup>5</sup>But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” [as an offering] <sup>6</sup>he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word [law] of God.<sup>7</sup>You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:***

***<sup>8</sup>“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;  
<sup>9</sup>in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”*** [Isaiah 28:13]

***<sup>10</sup>And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand:  
<sup>11</sup>it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.”<sup>12</sup>Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?”<sup>13</sup>He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.<sup>14</sup>Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”<sup>15</sup>But Peter said to him, “Explain the parable to us.”<sup>16</sup>And he said, “Are you also still without understanding?<sup>17</sup>Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? [excreted] <sup>18</sup>But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.<sup>19</sup>For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.<sup>20</sup>These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”*** Matthew 15:1-20 (ESV)

Whenever we study God's Word, it is essential that we consider the full context of any passage into which we want to delve more thoroughly. This protects us from drawing unwarranted conclusions, and guards against our reading anything into the passage to impose our own pre-conceived lesson upon it (eisegesis) instead of drawing out the lessons that God intended to teach us from the passage (exegesis). We've already carefully considered the context of this particular passage.

Furthermore, when studying the gospel accounts it is always wise to look at any parallel passages in the other gospel accounts along with their contexts. A primary example of the need for this care is with the Sermon on the Mount. We find that only Matthew gathers all of those teachings together in one place. The other gospel accounts contain passages that cover many of these same teachings by Jesus, but in different context. Does this mean that the accounts are in conflict and therefore not reliable? Certainly not! It is important for us to remember that the gospel writers more often than not focused more on the “big ideas” of their accounts much more than strict adherence to a chronological timeline. Furthermore, recall that among the so-called “synoptic” (same viewpoint) gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke, only Matthew's is an eyewitness account. Mark and Luke no doubt heard

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many of the accounts of Jesus' ministry they wrote about from Matthew himself! Does that mean that we should deprecate these "second-hand" accounts? Certainly not! Remember it is God Himself by the leading of His Spirit in the minds of His chosen scribes who is the true author of the gospels as well as all the rest of His Word.

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With that said, we find a parallel account of our current study passage in Mark. Let's take a quick look at it before we dive in.

*<sup>1</sup>Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup>(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, <sup>4</sup>and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) <sup>5</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" <sup>6</sup>And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,*

*"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; <sup>7</sup>in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'*

*<sup>8</sup>You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."*

*<sup>9</sup>And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! <sup>10</sup>For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' <sup>11</sup>But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)— <sup>12</sup>then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, <sup>13</sup>thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."*

*<sup>14</sup>And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." [NU manuscript omits verse 16 = "He who has ears to hear, let him hear"] <sup>17</sup>And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. <sup>18</sup>And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, <sup>19</sup>since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) <sup>20</sup>And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. <sup>21</sup>For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup>coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride,*

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***foolishness. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.*** Mark 7:1-23 (ESV)

We can quickly discern that Mark's version of the account is not identical but quite similar to Matthew's. Like Matthew, Mark was a Jewish believer. We have no information in the Bible about when Mark's conversion took place. The first mention of Mark is in Acts 12:12 when Peter came to the house of Mark's mother Mary after being miraculously released by an angel from imprisonment by Herod (probably Herod Antipas – tetrarch of Galilee). That happened just before the feast of unleavened bread about one year after Jesus' death and resurrection (Acts 12:3) – possibly several years, since Antipas continued to reign until 39 AD. Mark may have come to faith before Jesus' death on the cross or perhaps sometime after the first Pentecost when God poured out His Spirit on Jesus' 11 remaining chosen disciples, and Peter preached the sermon in Jerusalem when 3,000 were added to the newborn Church (Acts 2). Assuming that Mark was not yet a disciple when the event reported in this passage took place, he must have heard the story from Matthew or one of the others who followed Jesus during His earthly ministry.

Most interesting about Mark's account though is his use of parenthetical explanations for some of the details surrounding this story. From these we can clearly see that while Matthew wrote his account primarily for Jews, Mark must have intended his account to be read by a broader audience including Gentiles who would not have understood the Jewish laws and traditions mentioned in the story. So, Mark took the time to explain them.

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Returning now to Matthew's account, let's go through it verse-by-verse.

***<sup>1</sup>Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,  
<sup>2</sup>“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.”*** Matthew 15:1-2 (ESV)

As previously mentioned, Matthew's gospel is not a chronological account, so we need to be cautious in trying to determine where this event took place. The last account in the previous chapter found Jesus healing people in Genneseret following the feeding of the 5000. Genneseret is a level area between Jesus' home base in Capernaum near the Jordan river's inflow into the Sea of Galilee and Magdala – the home of Mary Magdalene a few miles south along the western shore. Jesus may or may not have still been there when these people arrived from Jerusalem.

The exact location is unimportant. What **is** important is that the Pharisees and their entourage of scribes were absolute legalists who virtually worshiped the Law of Moses - priding themselves on their strict adherence to the letter of the Law and piling up hundreds of additional legal requirements for Jewish life over and above the commandments of God. Of course, Jesus strongly disdained their views and the legalistic lifestyle they imposed on His children.

When these folks came asking Jesus this question, they really didn't want an honest answer. Nor did they even particularly care about Jesus' disciples' disobedience of their cleanliness tradition. They came for the express purpose of gathering dirt on Jesus so they would have something to use against Him before the Jewish council of judges (Sanhedrin), and while they were at it to show off their own piety before the people in contrast to the “unlawful” actions of Jesus' and His disciples. Of course, Jesus was fully aware of their agenda, but not knowing that Jesus was God the Son come to Earth in the flesh of a man, they never suspected that Jesus was onto them from the very beginning.

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***3He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ [Exodus 20:12] and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’***

***5But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” [as an offering] 6he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word [law] of God. Matthew 15:3-6 (ESV)***

As He so often did, Jesus used the occasion as a teaching opportunity. Not for the Pharisees. He knew the hardness of their hearts against Him and against His Gospel. Very likely at a later time, some of them would come to know Him as their מָשִׁיחַ **māshîyach** but their hearts were not yet ready. This lesson was for those who were gathered around to witness Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ challenge.

Jesus didn’t usually frame His lessons as lectures. Certainly, Jesus did preach sermons when people were gathered to listen to Him speak. But that wasn’t His usual teaching practice. Like all effective teachers, Jesus most often taught by asking His disciples questions to coax them into giving deeper consideration to the issues at hand themselves as He does here. In response to the Pharisees’ question why Jesus’ disciples didn’t follow their ordained cleanliness practices, Jesus asked the Pharisees why they had perverted God’s Law which they professed to hold in great regard in implementing traditions of their own creation that conflicted with God’s own Law and foisting them onto the Israelite people.

In this case, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of breaking God’s 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment given to Moses on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 20:12.

***12“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. Exodus 20:12 (ESV)***

They had implemented a scam to take money away from supporting their parents to give to the temple treasury from which the Pharisees themselves benefited. Not only that, we see in Mark 7:11-12 that the Pharisees were directing other Israelites to do the same – essentially robbing other Israelites’ parents for their own gain.

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***7You 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; 9in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” [Isaiah 28:13]***

What angered Jesus the most wasn’t the Pharisees’ grafting themselves as much as their taking advantage of other innocent people. The Pharisees were devoted to following the letter of God’s Law (except in the cases where they deceitfully circumvented it), but were utterly oblivious to the Spirit of God’s Law given as provision for His chosen people. Thus Jesus angrily and sarcastically chastised them on another occasion.

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***23“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. 24You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!”*** Matthew 23:23-24 (ESV)

**NOTE** – Both gnats and camels were forbidden in God’s Law for Jews to eat. In this example, Jesus is saying that the Pharisees were “majoring in the minors” making sure not to eat the forbidden tiny gnat, while ignoring the (literally) weightier violation of the Law in eating the huge camel. Of course, the Pharisees weren’t *actually* eating either gnats or camels if they could avoid it. Nevertheless, we take Jesus’ sarcastic point.

**BTW** – These shenanigans still go on in the state of Israel today. There are many irrational and downright silly שַׁבָּת *šabāt* restrictions like the special שַׁבָּת *šabāt* elevator that stops on every floor so that passengers won’t do the unlawful work of pressing a button to select a floor on שַׁבָּת *šabāt*. There are silly dietary restrictions like never eating meat and dairy at the same meal because that would be tantamount to unlawfully boiling a young goat in its mother’s milk (at least symbolically). All the while, Israelis circumvent portions of the law that are inconvenient to their financial wellbeing – following the strict letter of the law (usually) but not its Spirit. For example, no Jew would dream of working agricultural land during its sabbatical year prescribed in the Law of Moses. They have the poor Arab residents of Israel work the land in those years instead, conveniently ignoring the fact that the land still doesn’t enjoy its seventh-year rest as God commanded. They forget the history of the Babylonian captivity which lasted exactly 70 years because God punished the Israelites after they failed to give the land its sabbatical for exactly 490 years (70 sabbatical years).

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***10And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: 11it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.”*** Matthew 15:10-11 (ESV)

We can imagine that the Pharisees has shuffled off grumbling by this time after Jesus’ rebuke, so Jesus took the opportunity to teach the bystanders more fully. At some other time and place (earlier in Matthew’s account, but not necessarily earlier chronologically), Jesus said that our words reflect the character of our hearts. On that occasion, Jesus responded angrily when the Pharisees had objected to His healing people on שַׁבָּת *šabāt*.

***34You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. 36I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, 37for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”*** Matthew 12:34-37 (ESV)

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***12Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” 13He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.***

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***14 Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.*** Matthew 15:12-14 (ESV)

This is an intriguing statement by Jesus. The sects of the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus' day were part of the priestly class in Israelite society. In God's Law, the priests were to be from the tribe of Jacob's third son Levi. Specifically, they were to come from the clan of Moses' brother Aaron. But by the time the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity, many Jews could no longer prove their tribal ancestry. Of course, this problem only got worse over the next 500+ years between the return from the exile and Jesus' birth. Although ostensibly the Pharisees and Sadducees were part of the priesthood, very likely a good number of them were only "passing" as Levites. These may even have believed they were of Levi although they were not. Of course, even though many Jews were and are uncertain of their lineage, God certainly knows, just as He knows every hair on the heads of all His children and calls all of the stars He has created by their names. Jesus says here that those "passing" Levites including no doubt some of the Pharisees and Sadducees would eventually be eliminated from the priesthood.

Jesus Himself wasn't as concerned with the lineage of the Pharisees, as He was with their apostasy. Thus, He called them blind guides who should simply be ignored and left to wander blind until they are rooted up. Although it doesn't specifically say so here, no doubt Jesus was entirely uninterested in the fact He might have offended some of the Pharisees. He knew that in the hardness of their hearts they would be unable to accept His Gospel message, so He simply chose not to trouble with them except when they chose to trouble Him, and on those occasions as we have seen, He chose to minister to the onlookers whose hearts could be reached by His message.

**NOTE** – The determination of Jewish lineage was rendered virtually impossible by the destruction of the synagogue records during the Nazi holocaust during WWII. But modern science has discovered a genetic marker in Levite DNA that is unique to the tribe of Levi. Thus, although most Jews today have no idea of their tribal origin, Levites may be reliably identified. This is certainly no coincidence. When the Temple is finally re-built in fulfillment of prophecy, the Jews will now be able to select the members of the new priesthood using this genetic marker.

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***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? [excreted] 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.***

Matthew 15:15-18 (ESV)

You have to love Peter. Is there anyone else who was having any trouble understanding what Jesus meant when He said that it is not what goes into the mouth but what comes out that defiles someone. Maybe Jesus was just repeating Himself like any good teacher does, and Matthew just called out Peter for good measure.

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***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.*** Matthew 15:19-20 (ESV)

The prophet Jeremiah didn't have much good to say about the human heart.

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***9The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately sick;  
who can understand it?*** Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)

Such is the human condition since our fall from grace in the Garden. Every one of us is a desperate sinner by birth and by choice. Our only hope for re-birth out of our inherent wickedness is salvation by the blood of Jesus on the cross.

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Before we go home, I feel compelled to say that Jesus is by no means saying that we shouldn't wash our hands before dinner. The science is clear – hand washing is one of our most effective defenses against the spread of disease. In fact the Law of Moses and Jewish traditions were early pioneers in adopting this helpful discipline. When Jesus taught this lesson here in Matthew 15:1-20, He wasn't talking about our physical cleanliness, but our Spiritual wellbeing and the Spiritual wellbeing of those around us which are infinitely more important. If we have God's Spirit dwelling within us, our words will reflect His goodness coming from our hearts. Jesus put it this way...

***38Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'*** John 7:38 (ESV)

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### Looking Ahead

God willing, next time we'll continue with our study of Matthew 15.