

VAIN WORSHIP

Chapter 15 highlights the age-old conflict between truth and tradition. Jesus was concerned with truth, but His enemies were more concerned with their man-made traditions. Traditions are not necessarily good or bad. Even the traditions of men can have some value, and they should not be discarded simply because they are old. However, some traditions are God-given, and those must be observed (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

The Jews had many traditions collected over the years from their various rabbis and scholars. Many of their traditions were not written down at first, but were transmitted orally. In spite of this fact, Jewish leaders expected the people to observe these traditions. The rabbis claimed that Moses had given this oral law to the elders of Israel, who had then passed it down to them. The oral law was eventually recorded in what is called *The Mishnah*. The big problem was that *these man-made traditions began to take precedence over God's Word*. Jesus confronted this issue, pointing out that traditions had caused the Jews to “transgress the commandment of God” (v. 3). The result was that their worship was “vain” because they were “teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” (v. 9).

THE LEGALISTIC ACCUSATION (15:1, 2)

¹Then some 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 bread.”

Who were these people who so valued tradition? The “scribes” transcribed the writings of the rabbis and other teachers of the Jews. There were civil and ecclesiastical copyists. They were often called “teachers of the law” (Matthew 22:35; Luke 5:17). By virtue of their profession, they became recognized for their knowledge of the law of Moses.

The “Pharisees” (“separated ones”) were the largest sect among the Jews. They were the legalists of their day (see Matthew 23:1–10; John 8:1–11), holding fast to both the written law and oral traditions. They arose in opposition to the attempt to promote the Grecian culture among the Jews in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. They generally held to the doctrines of the resurrection and immortality of the soul, in contrast to the Sadducees. They also believed in the doctrine of future reward and punishment (Acts 23:8).

Some of the scribes also belonged to this sect. Since these men were from Jerusalem, they were probably sent to Jesus by the Sanhedrin.

In their accusation against the Lord's disciples, they did not try to hide that it was their man-made tradition that was being violated and not a commandment of God. The disciples were condemned for not washing their hands before they ate. The confrontation really had nothing to do with whether or not they washed their hands; the complaint was that they did not wash them in the ceremonial way prescribed by tradition. The rabbinical requirement was for the hands to be held with the fingers pointed upward, and water was poured over the hands until it ran down to the wrists. The water was then poured over the hands with the fingers pointing downward. Then each hand was scrubbed with the fist of the other.

A superstition had attached itself to this ritual cleansing. A demon named Shibtah was said to attach himself to a sleeping person's hands. If the hands were not washed before mealtime the next morning, the demon was said to enter the victim's body through the food he consumed. Jesus may have had this superstition in mind when He responded to these critics (v. 11).

THE COUNTER-ACCUSATION (15:3-6)

³And He answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.' ⁵But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God," ⁶he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition."

Jesus made an accusation of His own (v. 3). He told the Jews the truth: They were the ones who were violating God's law by practicing their traditions. He presented them with an illustration: They were violating the fifth commandment, which said to "honor your father and mother" (v. 4; Exodus 20:12). Jesus added to this commandment the one made in Leviticus 20:9, which includes the penalty of death for anyone "who curses his father or his mother."

There was no social welfare system among the Jews in the time of Christ. It was understood that children would provide for their parents when they got too old to provide for themselves.

One tradition even said that a son was bound to support his father even if he had to beg for him. Even though this was a tradition and not God's Word, Jesus clearly defined the command to "honor . . . father and mother" as including not only love and respect, but also financial assistance if needed.

The Jewish leaders had devised a tradition to avoid the responsibility to help their parents. If their parents asked for help, they would respond, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God," or say that this money was "Corban," that is, dedicated to God (Mark 7:11). A provision had been made whereby they could declare all they had dedicated to God. Even though they may never have used their possessions for God's service, they could not use the devoted items for anything else. This vow not only prevented them from helping their parents, but it forbade them to do so. By creating this tradition, Jesus said they had "invalidated the word of God" (v. 6b).

THE DIVINE JUDGMENT (15:7-11)

⁷"You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:

⁸This people honors Me with their lips,
But their heart is far away from Me.

⁹But in vain do they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men."

Jesus concluded His reply with an application. This prophecy in 15:8, 9 that is quoted from Isaiah 29:13 proved that they had violated God's Word. It showed their tradition to be false. God wants our hearts, not just our lip service (v. 8; Romans 10:9, 10). He wants us to love Him from the heart (Matthew 22:37), to sing from the heart (Colossians 3:16), to obey from the heart (Ephesians 6:6), and even to give from the heart (2 Corinthians 9:7). Worship "in spirit and truth" must come from the heart (John 4:23, 24).

In contrast with true worship, there is religious activity which Jesus called "vain" (v. 9). Some today think that it does not matter how we worship God. They view God as a kind of benevolent figure who accepts anything we choose to offer Him as worship. That is not the case (Malachi 1:7-9).

Specifically, worship by these hypocrites was "vain" ("worthless"; "futile") because they were

“teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” Many man-made doctrines are being taught today and are given precedence over God’s Word. Those who spread such false doctrines are worshiping God in vain.

¹⁰After Jesus called the crowd to Him, He said to them, “Hear and understand. ¹¹It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.”

Many of those in the crowd surrounding Jesus (v. 10) may have been among the ones mentioned in 14:34–36, who had seen His miracles or brought loved ones to Him to be healed. They had obviously been standing nearby and observed the confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. He called them closer in order to explain what He had just said to these leaders.

The expression “hear and understand” was Jesus’ way of saying, “Pay close attention to what I am saying.” Since His words were a clear contrast to the time-honored tradition of washing one’s hands in the ceremonial way before eating a meal, it was no doubt difficult for many of them to understand or accept.

“It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man,” He said (v. 11). We know the nature of germs today and realize that washing our hands before eating is a wise thing to do. Jesus was not condemning the washing of hands, nor was He implying that a person cannot get sick because of a failure to do so. He was referring instead to the tradition of the scribes and Pharisees which had to do with being ceremonially unclean. Jesus’ point was that nothing we put into our mouths will make us spiritually unclean. Holiness does not come from the outside, but it proceeds from the inside out (Matthew 23:25–28). It is in the heart that evil originates (Matthew 15:19).

A PROPHETIC STATEMENT (15:12–14)

¹²Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” ¹³But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”

The disciples were astonished at Jesus’ teaching that foods do not defile a person. They had been raised with the strict Jewish dietary restrictions of clean and unclean animals (Leviticus 11). It was difficult for them to think differently about these requirements (see Acts 10:14; Galatians 2:11–14). Their comment to Jesus about offending the Pharisees revealed their lack of spiritual maturity at that time. Jesus was not concerned with political correctness. He was concerned with truth. He knew that His words would offend the Pharisees. The truth sometimes hurts; it often offends people. Truth should always be spoken in love (Ephesians 4:15), but the truth must be spoken (1 Timothy 2:4).

Jesus answered the disciples’ concerns by saying, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted” (v. 13). While this statement can be broadened to include many false doctrines and religious systems, in this context Jesus was referring to the false doctrines and the man-made system that had been established by the Pharisees. The Jews referred to a doctrine as a plant. These man-made traditions were plants which God had not planted. The Pharisees themselves did not have a God-given mandate to be the teachers of His people. They were self-appointed.

Our Lord’s warning to His disciples was “Let them alone. . . .” He was essentially saying to them, “Stay away from the Pharisees. They have nothing to offer you.” Jesus later warned them about “the leaven of the Pharisees” (Matthew 16:11–16). Still later, Paul would warn the church at Corinth about the leavening influence of wickedness (1 Corinthians 5:6–8). The Jewish Pharisees are gone now, but their spirit lives on in man-made religious traditions, legalism, hypocrisy, and surface spirituality.

The Pharisees considered themselves “guides to the blind.” Jesus used that assertion to say that they were “blind guides of the blind.” They did not know the truth themselves, and they were leading others down the path of destruction. Some believe that if a person is following a false teacher, the teacher will be condemned but the followers will not. Jesus showed that both the teacher and the follower have a responsibility. This is why He often warned, “Take care what you hear” (Mark 4:24). The “pit” here is a reference to judgment.

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¹⁵Peter said to Him, “Explain the parable to us.” ¹⁶Jesus said, “Are you still lacking in understanding also?” ¹⁷“Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? ¹⁸But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. ²⁰These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.”

Peter was not content with the two short parables alone (vv. 13, 14). The Greek word for “parable” (παραβολή, *parabole*) suggests an enigmatic saying rather than an extended illustration. Peter wanted an explanation (v. 15). Perhaps his problem was not so much that he could not understand what Jesus had said, but rather that he had difficulty accepting it.

Some view Jesus’ question in verse 16 as a strong denunciation of the disciples’ lack of spiritual discernment, but others think it is only a mild rebuke. Jesus patiently explained the meaning of the parable.

The statement in verse 20 seems obvious to us, with our modern knowledge of health-related subjects, but it was shocking to those of Jewish heritage. Whatever enters the mouth eventually enters the intestines and is eliminated from the body as waste (v. 17); food never enters the heart (see Mark 7:18, 19). In contrast, whatever comes out of the mouth proceeds from the “heart” (the thinking and reasoning part of the brain); this can defile a person (v. 18).

In Jesus’ list (v. 19), except for the mention of evil thoughts, He followed the second part of the Ten Commandments—those pertaining to relationships between fellowmen (Exodus 20:13–16). Many of these same sins are condemned in other passages (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; Galatians 5:19–21; Ephesians 5:3–5). Jesus had already taught in the Sermon on the Mount that sins begin in the heart (Matthew 5:21–37). When a person’s heart is pure, the words that proceed from his mouth will be pure. When his heart is wicked, the things that proceed from his mouth will be evil. While washing one’s hands before eating is certainly a healthy thing to do, it is far more important for people to cleanse their hearts.

“Worship” is “reverent love and devotion for a deity . . . ardent devotion; adoration.”¹ By definition, worship should be God-centered and not man-centered. Worship is offering praise for all that God and His Son have done and are doing for us. It is the one opportunity we have to say, “Thank You, Father!” and “Thank You, Jesus! You are so good to us.” Worship is not just for the purpose of making us feel good. Certainly, true worship that is directed to God will fill the worshiper with love, joy, and peace; but these are the by-products of our spiritual devotion.

Many today believe that it does not matter how we worship God in the worship assembly as long as we are sincere. If people want jazz, country, or another style of music in worship services, that is all right. If they want solos, quartets, or choirs, that is all right. If they want instrumental music in worship, or a group that mimics instruments in worship, they think that is okay. If they want a drama presentation in the place of a sermon, then they have it. Worship is not entertainment! It was not designed to please people; it was designed to please God.

God has always had a plan of worship. It is unreasonable and unscriptural to think He does not have one today. God obviously told Cain and Abel what He wanted them to offer in sacrifice to Him (Hebrews 11:4). Abel obeyed, but Cain chose to offer according to what he decided. God accepted Abel’s offering and rejected Cain’s (Genesis 4:3–7). Nadab and Abihu, two sons of Aaron who were priests (Exodus 24:9, 10), were “consumed” by fire out of heaven when they offered “strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them” (Leviticus 10:1, 2). God had specified that the fire to light the incense altar was to be obtained with a censor from the altar-fire, and many scholars agree that this was not done. Whatever “strange fire” means, it was not part of God’s plan of worship for the Mosaic age; Nadab and Abihu paid a high price for their disobedience. We learn by approved apostolic example how the early church worshiped God (see Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:20–34;

¹American Heritage Dictionary, 4th ed. (2001), s.v. “worship.”

14:15; 16:2). If the church under the direction of inspired men worshiped God each Lord's Day by singing, praying, contributing, communing, and hearing a message from God's Word, we do not have the right to change that pattern.

Jesus said that "true worshipers . . . must worship [God] in spirit and truth" (John 4:23, 24). To worship "in truth" means according to God's Word, which is truth (John 17:17), and to worship in spirit is to worship from the spirit (the inner person). Outward motions are not enough (see Malachi 1:6–14). How can we worship in spirit? First, our thoughts must be centered on God. Second, we should meditate on the truths that are being taught. Third, we must desire to please God. Fourth, our worship must be sincere. We can be excused for not having the best singing voices or wording the most eloquent prayers, but we cannot allow ourselves to be insincere.

In His Word God condemns false worship, willful worship, vain worship, and self-worship.

Obviously, not all worship is acceptable to God. Worship is unacceptable when God is not the object, when we worship according to our own standards, when we fail to offer God our best or to offer to Him what He has asked for, and when the worship style takes precedence over that which God has commanded.

OFFENSE & COMPASSION

Jesus did not set out to offend, but He offered no apology if the truth hurt. Jesus condemned the Pharisees. He called them "hypocrites," "filthy plates," "blind guides," "white-washed tombs," and a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 23:13–16, 23–29, 33). However, when we read the last few verses of that chapter (23:37–39), we see His deep feelings for all of His people. He was stern with those who needed to be confronted and compassionate with those who needed a gentle touch—but He always loved both.

Sellers Crain