

# Matthew 15:1-20

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[ 0 : 00 ] Do turn, if you will, to Matthew chapter 15, page 820 in the Black Church Bible.

! It's a strange and yet inescapable fact that you can't avoid it if you read through the Gospels and that probably the fiercest and the most determined opposition to Jesus and his teaching and ultimately the opposition that leads to his death comes from the most zealous religious leaders of the time.

Those who you have expected would welcome Jesus are the fiercest in their opposition to him. And the Pharisees, whom he's in conversation with in Matthew 15, were undoubtedly the most skilled thinkers of their time in the religious realm.

The teachers of the law that he talks about, the scribes in verse 1, are with them. And they become the fiercest opponents with Jesus and there's this frequent controversy, isn't there, in Matthew's Gospel.

It would be a great mistake to imagine though that these controversies that Jesus had in the first century are with people who belong to a kind of rather exclusive religious group who have got anything to do with us this afternoon, this morning.

[ 1 : 40 ] We might think, well there's nothing to do with us, is it? But nothing could be further from the truth. Because the spirit of the Pharisee and the opponents to Jesus has touched the lives of ordinary people.

And it makes for catastrophe and disaster in our relationship with God. And sadly, very often we can't even see it. So there's four areas that I want us to see this morning that touch upon our lives. And affect people like you and me. Because the spirit of the Pharisees and the scribes is alive and kicking today. The first area is that of true authority. The second area is true worship.

The third area is true leadership. And the fourth area is true morality. And they all arise from this bizarre encounter that Jesus has with the Pharisees and the ceremonial cleansing of the disciples' hands before they eat.

So there's vital teaching in these four areas. Let me give it to you again. Verses 1-6, authority. And the alternatives that you're faced with this morning are human authority or divine authority.

[ 2 : 49 ] And the second area is in verse 7-9, a true worship. You have those people that honour Jesus with, honour God with their lips, but their hearts apart from him.

They worship in vain. And the two alternatives there are, you either worship Jesus with your lips, or worship with your heart. In 12-14, you've got the issue of leadership.

And the alternative there is self-appointed leaders, or God-appointed leaders. And then the last issue is true morality. And so the issue that Jesus is concerned with, I'm here, is internal or external. Is it human or is it divine? True authority. First of all, the Pharisees, and they come up to Jesus, don't they? They bring on the fight, and they challenge him. And they challenge him because his disciples were disregarding one of, in their view, one of the most important laws of Jewish tradition. They neglect it or wash their hands before they ate. And their first question to Jesus is, if you are so concerned with the honour of God, and the fulfilling of the law, why do you allow your disciples to break the tradition of the elders?

[ 4 : 02 ] They don't wash before they eat. Now there's two things you need to know. On the whole, this tradition of washing hands before eating, it's got nothing to do with hygiene.

And it's got nothing to do with washing our hands for the sake of medical hygiene. So children, you'll get up to the dinner table, and your parents will say, have you washed your hands?

Okay? This passage is not a command that you have to do that. You should do that, it's a good thing. It's a perfectly wise question your mum and dad are asking. Eating without washing your hands is hygienically unwise.

But it's nothing to do with that. Okay? This is not about hygiene. It's about ceremonial uncleanness. About ceremonial defilement. About being unclean before God.

And unacceptable to God. The second thing we need to make clear is, the traditions that they speak of, can you see them in verse 2? They break the tradition of the elders.

[ 5 : 03 ] And the tradition of the elders are human-made additions to the law of God. So you know the law of God. And the moral law of God, it consists in the Ten Commandments.

You shall know where the God is before me. You shall not make it up for yourself and I. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in name. Remember the Sabbath day to Peter. You know those laws. And then we know that God gave various instructions to his people, didn't they? The moral law, that remains. But you have the civil aspects of the law which govern Israel. And you have the ceremonial aspects which govern the worship of Israel. How they were to live in the world in connection with various issues.

But the Jewish leaders, they added the Jewish elders to these commandments. A multitude of detailed prescriptions.

Originally, all to help you seek to keep God's law. They were passed on already by a word of mouth. And they became part of the teaching of the elders. The tradition that was handed down from one generation.

[ 6 : 07 ] And they went into detail on almost anything you could conceivably imagine. And hair splitting became a characteristic of it. So if you're cutting up herds for your lunch today, you separate a tenth for God.

This edition to the law of God, all these various editions, they became written down in the 2nd century AD. It was a document called the Mishnah. And further to that, there was a document called the Gemara.

Which was a commentary on the Mishnah. And so the Mishnah was a whole series of editions to the law of God. And the Gemara was a commentary on the Mishnah.

And so there's a vast amount of laws and regulations that are part of the tradition of the elders. And this series of regulations and traditions, they are passed down from one generation to another.

And Jesus immediately challenges them. And you will notice what he's challenging. He's challenging the whole issue of authority. So look at verse 3.

[ 7 : 16 ] He answered them. Why do you write the commandments of God for the sake of your traditions? In other words, he says, Why is it that you put the tradition of man above the word of God?

As the ultimate authority? Why do you put the tradition of the elders as the ultimate authority and you disregard the word of God? I must run about every single one that's here this morning. How am I to regulate my life? How are you to live? Under what authority will you live? Do I set the priorities of my life?

And do I understand how I should live? And Jesus is saying there is only one authority and it is the authority of the word of God. In Holy Scriptures. And you've added all kinds of laws and regulations. And you are now at the point where your traditions are more important to you than the word of God. The particular incident that Jesus is referring to is in verse 4. Where it says, For God commanded, honour your father and your mother.

[ 8 : 33 ] And whoever revives, whoever hates his father or mother shall surely die. But you say, if anyone tells his father or his mother, What would you have gained from me is given to God.

You need not honour his father and mother. For the sake of your tradition you have made void, unilify the word of God. So here's somebody and he's got an obligation.

He's got an obligation from God to care for his elderly father and mother. And he's thought about it and he's found an amazing way of getting out of it.

They have a tradition which says, If you have a certain amount of money, That you should be devoted to care for your elderly dad and mum. What you can do is you can say, It is devoted to God, I'm going to give it to God in the future.

And then, having made that vow, it can't be touched. And you can't help your dad and mum. You get to keep the money. It's marvellously spiritually religious.

[ 9 : 36 ] But totally fake. It's a totally fake reason for neglecting a God-given duty towards your elderly parents. What do you do? You say, the money is actually being pledged.

It's actually being given to the temple or to God. The word that Mark uses in his gospel, The word they used for this was the word Korban. There was a law of Korban and their traditions.

And if somebody came along, And they found out a professing believer, And they were neglecting their dad and mum. And they said to them, Well, what about this obligation that you have to your parents?

God has given you these parents for you to care for them. And they would say, Well, I'm really sorry, but we don't have any money. Did you not? If they worked at a decent job, And you knew that they had a considerable amount of money stashed away, You could say to them, But actually, what about that money that you have stashed away?

What about your earnings? What are you doing with them? And they would say, Ah, that's Korban. It's devoted to God. And the thing about that kind of gift or money, Is that it wasn't given to God immediately.

[10:43] It was kind of pledged. It was a delayed gift. And what they were really saying is, I intend to give it to God, I just can't give it yet. But it excused them from a higher authority, Of God's word that applied to their lives.

And Jesus says, You are really breaking the commandments of God, For the sake of your tradition. And he summarises it at the end of verse 6. Can you see it? He says, You make void, You nullify, The word of God, By your traditions.

Now we need to recognise, That what Jesus is teaching here, Is, There is only one authority, Under which we may live. And that authority is the word of God. Of holy scripture.

And that applies in all sorts of ways. You make a mark and say, Listen, We live in the 21st century, This has got absolutely nothing to do with us. Everybody will tell you, That's not how we live today. But I would argue, There is still a tradition. There's actually the tradition of modern culture. The issue stands, Isn't it?

[11:53] Whether you are living, Under the tradition of the ancient elders, Or whether you are living under the tradition, Of the modern media, And what society, Dictates to you, What you are allowed to say, And what you are allowed to believe, Or are you living under the authority, Of the word of God, That is station.

What's your authority, By which you live, And guide your life. There are some traditions out there, That are neutral. Not all traditions are bad.

I think in the Christian church, Some traditions are neutral. We may recognise, That certain traditions are helpful, And it's possible to live, Under those traditions easily, For instance.

So, Since coming back from holiday, Last year, I don't want to even notice, I have worn a tie, To preach. I don't wear a pulpit robe, I don't wear a Geneva robe.

I've stopped not wearing a tie, To preach on Sundays. It's entirely neutral. I think I've got good reasons. It covers, An ever increasing stomach, For one. But I've got no problem, With anyone who does wear a tie.

[13:05] I've got no problem, With anyone who wears, Geneva robes. I've got no problems, With anyone who wears, A dog collar actually. I don't think, That one moment, That wearing a tie, Is the law of God, That directed me in the matter.

Or I don't think, Certainly I don't think, That it's a breach, Of the law of God, By people who don't wear, A tie of a bridge. Not in the cycles, It's tradition, It's neutral. You may, You may not. Let's think of a tradition, That's not neutral.

And that is the tradition, In some spheres, Of not having, A communion to God, But of having an altar. So some people, Come to the new building, And they say, Where's the altar?

You've got to have it. Because that is a tradition, Isn't it, Which the word of God, Would immediately, Forbid. Because on this table, We don't offer a sacrifice, To God, Because there is one sacrifice, Jesus Christ, Has made that sacrifice, Which is sufficient.

And so we meet, Our table, We meet around the table, Or at least we should, And we meet, To remember, The Lord's death, And the Lord's supper. And that's why, The word of God, Must dismiss tradition.

[14:21] But the vital issue, Is that, True authority, Is not human, It's divine. Second thing, That Jesus teaches, On verse 7, Is the present, True worship.

Is it the worship, Of the lips, Or is it the worship, Of the heart? You hypocrites, Says Jesus, To the Pharisees, He said, Isaiah, Was right, When he prophesied, Of you.

That's very interesting, I wish we could spend, More time on that, On verse 7. He prophesied, Of you, When he said, This people, Honours me, With their lips, But their heart, Is far from me, In vain, It's a waste of time, Total waste of time, Your worship, Teaching as doctrines, The commandments of man, He's quoting Isaiah 29, Verse 13, Isaiah 29, Is all about worship, And neither Jesus, Nor Isaiah, Were quarrelling, With the idea, Of people honouring God, And worshipping him, But it was the manner, In which they worshipped, Which disturbed him, The manner of Isaiah's contemporaries, And the Pharisees, Of Jesus' day, Because it is true, That their worship, Began, And ended, With their lips, Now I don't want you, To take this to the extreme, People often say, It doesn't matter actually, What we do in worship, As long as you mean it, That cannot, Biblically be so,

The second commandment, Forbizlet, But I do want you, To see this morning, That these people's lives, In Isaiah's day, And in Jesus' day, Were characterized, By externalism, And when you bring that, Into the area of worship, Their worship began, And it ended, With their lips, Their hearts, Were disengaged from it, And so Jesus says, They are not worshippers, They are actors, They wear a mask, They are hypocrites, You honor me, With your lips, But your heart, Is far from me, And it's all part, Of the Pharisees interest, Wasn't it, Do you remember, The ceremonial cleansing, They were into that, Of the hands, That matters to them, More than anything else, But their hands, Have been cleansed, And so they could go, Into the worship of God, Because it was the external issue, That had been dealt with, Have you washed your hands,

In this ceremonial, Way of doing it, Well then if you have, You're okay, You may worship God truly, And you can go through, The motions of worship, I don't think it's hard, To see how this applies today, Is it, How easy it is, For us to be, Taking, On our lips, Great hymns, We sing, Where our hearts, Where our minds, Where do the Lamb, Who was slain, Who receive honour, And glory, And majesty, And power, And dominion, It's so easy isn't it, While saying that, For us to have, Base thoughts, Horrible thoughts, About people, Who may be, In this city next to us, Filling our minds, With the irrelevant things, Of this week, You worship me with your lips, But your hearts, Are far from me, I believe, In worship, That we should only do, What God commands, And it's vitally important, [17:49] I don't think we're free, To do what we want, In worship, It's a regular principle, But the danger, For churches like ours, And people like myself, Is you think, Well we just, Go through the list, We took off the list, That we've got, The outward forms, Of worship, The kind of, Dialogical aspect, The movement of the gospel, Through the service, Does God say to you and I, You worship me with your lips, For your hearts, Are far from me, Third area, Is true leadership, Look at verses 12 to 14, The Pharisees, The Pharisees come to Jesus, And they say to him, What I suppose he knew anyway, And they say, Don't they, Don't you realise, How offended, You are, They are, Do you not know, They're offended, When they, When they hear the same, It's interesting, It's like I said,

The people who heard Jesus, Were offended, We get very, Very nervous, Don't we, About when people come to church, And they leave, Offended, They say, You've really done it, This time with the law, You've offended them, They are going to be, Very annoyed Jesus, Of course, The big question, Was Jesus going to run after them, Or write them a handwritten note, And say, Listen, I'm terribly sorry, I offended you, I didn't mean that, I hope you'll still, Be our friends, I hope you'll still come again, But Jesus replied, In verse 13, Every plant that my heavenly father, Has not planted, Will be rooted up, Leave him alone, They're blind guides, And if the blind, Lead the blind, Both will fall into a pit, So they come to Jesus, And they say, You've offended them, They were held in such high esteem, And that is righteousness, Scripture tells us, To honour leaders, Honour where honour is due, But they say to Jesus, You've offended them, They are really important people, And Jesus says, My father in heaven, Hasn't planted them,

They are plants, My heavenly father, Has not planted, And they will be uprooted, Now that reminds us of something, Doesn't it, Think about that, They are plants, My heavenly father, Has not planted, Do you remember, Go back to chapter, Go back two chapters, And you have the language, Of the tears, And the wheat, Do you remember that, The parable, There are plants, Out there, That the owner of the field, Has not planted, And they come, And they say, Someone has sown seed, In your field, And ruined it, Weeds in your field, And the planter says, Do you remember, An enemy has done this, There are other plants, That the owner, Is not planted, And what's the advice, Of the owner, In that parable, Of the wheat, And the tears, It is, Leave them alone, An enemy has done this, It's not my father, Who has planted them, So she's saying, He's saying, They are either, Self-appointed leaders, Or the devil,

Has appointed them, But not my father, Leave them alone, They're blind guides, And if you follow them, You will lead, They will lead you, Into the ditch, And so these leaders, Actually you need, To shun them, I'm not going to do them, Don't listen to them, That's hard isn't it, That's very very difficult, To speak in that way, About people who are respected, Religious leaders, In society, But it's very important, That you and I, Take what Jesus says seriously, And to recognise, That there are leaders, In churches, Like these Pharisees, Who in their own day, Were not planted by God, And one day, They will be taken away, They will be ripped up, They will be cast out, And Jesus says, Your task as the people of God, Is to recognise, The difference between, Leaders who are God appointed, And leaders who are self appointed, Because the ones who are self appointed, Are like blind guides, Will lead you into a pit too,

So it's an image isn't it, Play with the image for a minute, You've seen, We have a number of blind people, In England, You've seen on the bus, There's a blind beggar, Outside, Same suite on England, You imagine that, Another blind person, Leading them, Leading them across the road, The dangers of that, The person leading them, Can't see, And will lead them into a pit, Will lead them into huge danger, They're not verses that, We like to think about, And yet we need to think about them, And the final thing, Is the whole realm of morality, Is it inward, Or is it outward, And that brings us back, To the beginning of the conversation, With the Pharisees, Verse 15, Peter says, Explain this to us Jesus, He's according to the illustration, In verse 10 and 11, And he says, Hear and understand, Verse 11, It's not what goes into the mouth, That makes a person unclean, But what comes out of the mouth, That defiles a person, Then Peter says,

[ 22 : 59 ] Explain this parable to us, Tell me, Let me tell you, What the idea is behind this, The reason why the Pharisees, Were so concerned, With the washing of the hands, Was this, The Mishnah added, That to the law, And so they said, If you touch a Gentile, That's somebody who's not a Jew, That's the vast majority of us, If you touch them, You were ceremonially unclean, And then you get your packed lunch out, And you touch your food, And because you've not washed your hands, You've still got the uncleanness, From the Gentile, That's put into your food, And then you, Your unclean hands, Make your food unclean, And you pick up your unclean food, And you put it in your mouth, And your mouth is unclean, And your food goes down, From your mouth into your stomach, And your stomach becomes unclean, So you now are unclean, All because,

You touch, A Gentile, Then you touch the food, And the food has now gone into you, And they are saying, Uncleanness works from the external, In, Jesus says, You've got it completely, Precisely, And totally wrong, Because uncleanness, Doesn't come from touching things like, Dead bodies, Or Gentiles, Or whatever it was, They weren't allowed to touch, But uncleanness is already, In your heart, And in mine, Jesus says, It's not what goes into a man, That makes him unclean, And that's the point, In verse 16, 20, It's what comes out of a person, That makes them unclean, It's from their heart, And from your heart, And my heart, Comes every evil thing, And he gives us this horrible list, Doesn't he, In verse 18, Now do you see the point?

He's saying, The origin of your uncleanness, Of my sinfulness, Is not outside of ourselves, So that we, We don't say, Well watch what you touch, Watch what you look at, In case the uncleanness of that, Might enter into your life, And make you morally unclean, He says to you and I, No, Your heart is unclean, All the problems that you have, Come from here, I think it's so important, Isn't it?

For us to understand, That, The heart of the problem, Is the problem of the human heart, It's so important for parents, To understand that, With our children, What is the problem, With your children?

It's the problem, With their hearts, What's your problem? It's the problem of your heart, And so is mine, And so we live in a sight, I got a new diary, Two weeks ago, An academic diary, I love it, You go in a double it, So if you buy a new diary, And you think, A new diary, New you, And I'm going to use, Only one colour of pen, You know, I'm going to write neatly, Well, Two weeks later, It's a disaster, We are always thinking, Externally aren't we?

[ 26 : 11 ] And maybe that's you, Maybe you're not a Christian, What would it take, To fix the problems, In your life? Think about it, And I can guarantee, You're pretty much thinking, Well actually, I changed this, I go to the gym, I changed my job, I changed my family, I changed my area, And Jesus is saying, No, The truth is, The problem is your heart, And that is devastating, Isn't it?

And you children, Here this morning, You little ones, You can't create a perfect world, You can't do everything right, You can't get the perfect exams, The problems that are in your little lives, Like the problems in my life, Are the problems of my heart, And why is that so important?

That's so important, Because it drives us, To Jesus' teaching, And it says to you and I, What I need is a new heart, Because the only thing, That will help you, Is a new heart, And that's what Jesus, Is really concerned about this work, That's why another Pharisee, Came to see Jesus at night, Heard Jesus saying to him, Nicodemus, You need a new birth, You don't need a new teaching, You don't need a new diary, You need a new heart, And the person, Who would give them, This new heart, Was standing right in front of them, What an extraordinary business, It is isn't it, Moral change, True change, Real change, Does not come from, Tinkering about, With a few religious rules, And regulations, But moral change, Comes from a new heart, And that's exactly, What the Bible promises, Isn't it, That's why, God prophesied to Ezekiel, I will take out, Your stony heart, Of your flesh, And I will give you, A new heart, And I will write my law on it, And so the real issue, Is this this morning, Let me summarize, How do I see, True authority, Is it human, Or is it divine, How do I see, True worship, Is it what's on my lips, Or is it what's in my heart, How do I see, True leadership, Is it God appointed, Or self appointed, And how do I see, True morality, Is it outward, Or is it inward, In other words, Am I a Pharisee, Or am I a Christian, That's the issue, Let's pray,