

MATTHEW 14:34 – 15:20 THE BLINDING BARRIER OF TRADITION

The Bible wasn't originally penned with chapters and verses. Therefore, we can't always break the lesson at the end of a chapter. When it comes to the Gospels, this is especially true. So, when one is dividing the text into bites that can be swallowed, one has to pay close attention to the natural break of the text. This isn't always easy to spot. Matthew is good at breaking sections of the text into sections with a particular thrust to them. These sections are called pericopes.

Pericope – A section of text which is set apart for a particular theme within the overall text.

And this particular pericope is bookended by two large gatherings; one in which Jesus heals the multitude and the other where He feeds over four thousand.

We will also see that Jesus is moving around a great deal in this section and there is a reason for that which we will see as we move through the text.

We pick up the story as Jesus and the disciples hit land at Gennesaret where a large group throngs Jesus with those in need of healing. But as soon as He has finished ministering to the sick, there is another group waiting for Him, and they aren't there to shake hands.

Mt. 14:34 – 15:2

34 When they had crossed over, they came to the land of Gennesaret. 35 And when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent out into all that surrounding region, brought to Him all who were sick, 36 and begged Him that they might only touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched it were made perfectly well.

1 Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, 2 “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.”

- This contingent of scribes and Pharisees were from Jerusalem. (City slickers vs. hillbillies)
- Apparently the local scribes and Pharisees had had enough of Jesus and sent for “more educated” scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem.
- The point of contention: Jesus doesn't recognize the binding authority of the oral law referred to here as the “tradition of the elders.”
- Jesus counters.

3 He answered and said to them, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? 4 For God commanded, saying, “Honor your father and your mother”; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ 5 But you say, “Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God’” — 6 then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. 7 Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying:

**8 *‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth,
And honor Me with their lips,
But their heart is far from Me.
9 And in vain they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’*”**

- Jesus doesn't counter by justifying the actions of His disciples. Their actions have already been questioned once regarding eating/ harvesting on the Sabbath. The locals weren't able to handle Him there either. Rather, Jesus counters by asking a question.

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- The issue the Pharisees have is that of eating with unwashed hands. Originally this order was primarily for the priesthood in the OT. But eventually, most likely during the exile when the synagogue came about, it was taught that everyone should wash their hands prior to eating and other things. This tradition became codified in the oral law. There was no longer a distinction made between what was written in scripture and traditions taught as scripture.
- We aren't immune to this either. (Dress codes and no fishing on Sunday. Personal standards as well as cultural standards can become codified and then become self-righteous standards, which have very little, if no Biblical support at all.)
- These “Purity Laws” became the main barrier between the Jews and Gentiles. Though Israel was to be set apart, it wasn't to be because of how many times a day they washed their hands. It was to be their love and loyalty for YHWH.
- This barrier sets the stage for the rest of this pericope.

Regarding the issue of tradition over scripture:

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- Honor your Father and mother. (Honoring them by taking care of them in their old age.) One of the Decalogue. Not taking care of your parents was a capital offense! And you want to flog me about washing your hands?
- The gift and what that meant. (A type of endowment or gift given to the synagogue, sometimes in a memorial way, in the name of the parents, which helped the synagogue, but often left the parents in dire straits, financially. By

getting around the commandment in this way, they had made the Law of no effect by nothing more than a tradition.

- We can never elevate tradition, commentary or creeds above scripture. (This happens more than most are aware.)
- This showed the true heart of the religious hierarchy and to prove it, Jesus referenced the book of Isaiah.

7 Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying:

8 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth,

And honor Me with their lips,

But their heart is far from Me.

9 And in vain they worship Me,

Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'”

- Hypocrites: actors hiding behind masks.
- They play at religion. They say the right things, but their hearts aren't in their words. Their hearts are actually far from God and don't really want any part of Him.
- Isaiah 29 is another “woe” chapter where god actually speaks of destroying Jerusalem because of the hard hearts of the people.

Isa. 29:9-16

9 Pause and wonder!

Blind yourselves and be blind!

They are drunk, but not with wine;

They stagger, but not with intoxicating drink.

10 For the Lord has poured out on you

The spirit of deep sleep,

And has closed your eyes, namely, the prophets;

And He has covered your heads, namely, the seers.

11 The whole vision has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one who is literate, saying, “Read this, please.”

And he says, “I cannot, for it is sealed.”

12 Then the book is delivered to one who is illiterate, saying, “Read this, please.”

And he says, “I am not literate.”

13 Therefore the Lord said:

“Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths

And honor Me with their lips,

But have removed their hearts far from Me,

And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men,

14 Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work

Among this people,

A marvelous work and a wonder;

For the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
And the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden."
15 Woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the Lord,
And their works are in the dark;
They say, "Who sees us?" and, "Who knows us?"
16 Surely you have things turned around!
Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay;
For shall the thing made say of him who made it,
"He did not make me"?
Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it,
"He has no understanding"?

Interestingly enough, if you continue to read that chapter, God speaks of rebuilding Jerusalem.

- Note the "blind" language as we move on through Matthew. The blind are blind because they no longer seek the light, which is in the scriptures. They have replaced scripture with their own wisdom and commentary.

*10 When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear and understand: 11 Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man."
12 Then His disciples came and said to Him, "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?"
13 But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14 Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch."*

- Planted and uprooted. (Wheat and tares)
- Blind leading the blind.
- Once again, they don't understand because they don't want to understand. Therefore, leave them alone.
- Jesus doesn't deal with them anymore. He has said all He has to say.

*15 Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Explain this parable to us."
16 So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? 18 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. 19 For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. 20 These are*

the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

- Jesus is frustrated. The disciples should be ahead of the crowds and the Pharisees, but once again they are lagging behind.
- What you eat doesn't determine who you are. (This doesn't give anyone a pass as far as drunkenness and drugs are concerned.)
- Peter will learn this lesson again on a rooftop, some time later.
- Jesus makes it plain that what defiles a person is what comes out of the heart. The unclean things which come from the heart are not mere words but also behavior. They are addressed here as "evil thoughts" because thoughts, when entertained by the heart give rise to actions and words.

Mt. 5:21,22

21 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' 22 But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

Mt. 12:34,35

34 Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.

- Four of the six things Jesus lists as defiling are dealt with in the 10 commandments: murder, adultery, theft and false witness. Slander and sexual offenses are expansions on two of the other four in the list. These are things listed as sin in scripture. Hand washing for the common man is not on the list.
- It is our heart and what it produces that defiles us, not dirty hands.
- Jesus has continually tried to get this point across, but the hard heart and the blind can't see it.

APPLICATION:

Traditions can be good or bad, depending on what they are. Family traditions can be a good thing when they enhance the relationship within the family. Church traditions can be good when they are scriptural. But traditions, which are only built on custom and culture, can be bad when they have no scriptural

support or worse are thought to have scriptural support due to a modern cultural interpretation.

Tradition can create barriers to those outside the church and because we are so immersed in our church culture we can be blind to those barriers. Don't get me wrong, scripture has a great deal to say about what is and what isn't permissible in our lives and society, but we can sometimes twist these things into what we see as an ideal. When we do this we can be guilty of a subtle legalism, which is actually a form of self-righteousness. And when or if we talk to unbelievers, who are truly seeking God, we will see that this sort of thing can be a barrier that keeps them from even entering a church. We can't expect the unbeliever to come to church already acting, dressing or speaking as a mature believer. This is a hospital. We can't expect the sick to come in and not be sick. And we can't just tell them to not be sick. They must be made well by the Holy Spirit and a community that is willing to love them as they grow in the Kingdom. Their immune systems have been compromised for so long that it will take time for them to recover.

If we keep the main thing, the main thing and lovingly come beside them in their walk, then we can expect growth, both personally and numerically. But we shouldn't expect them to change everything overnight. That is like drinking from a fire hydrant. Let's check our blind spots and our motives so that we nurse the sick along, knowing that this is a journey – the journey of a lifetime.

QUESTIONS:

- What are some traditions we balked at in our younger Christian lives?
- Why did we balk at them?
- How and why have we changed our view of these things?
- Have we changed our way of thinking on these things?
- What traditions do we have that are purely cultural?
- Are they helpful or harmful?