Jesus’ Teaching on the Law

Read Matthew 15:1-11, 15-20

Key verses: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me. Their worship is empty since they teach instructions that are human rules” (Matthew 15:8-9)

“In the days of the first motion pictures,” wrote David Seamands, “long before there were actual movie theaters, the earliest movies in the Old West were shown in large outdoor tents. After several weeks of advertising, the traveling ‘cinemas’ would be set up. Cowboys would finish their work early in the evening and ride into town to see their first moving picture.

“Most cowboys had never seen such a thing before, so in the middle of the movie, during the customary melodramatic scene as the villain threatened certain death for the pretty heroine, the cowboys would be overcome with emotion. Suddenly one would pull out his six-shooter and shout, ‘Get ‘em boys!’ and the cowpokes would blaze away at the villain on the screen. By the time the manager rushed out to explain matters, they had already shot the screen full of holes and destroyed a whole side of the tent!

“Of course, we know how badly mistaken the cowboys were. For though the villain appeared on the screen, his image was really coming from the movie projector. If they had really wanted to do away with him, they should have turned around and shot the projector! For however much they might destroy the screen, the villain just kept right on with his villainy.

“In spiritual terms, the human heart is the projector, the source of the evil picture. If we want a good clean picture we will have to something about the projector!” (from God’s Electrocardiogram by David A. Semands).

In Matthew 15, Jesus deals with this important issue.

The Pharisees and legal experts “came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ‘Why are your disciples breaking the elders’ rules handed down to us? They don’t ritually purify their hands by washing before they eat’” (vv. 1-2).

Jesus answered by showing, first, the hypocrisy involved in their approach to religion: “Why do you break the command of God by keeping the rules handed down to you? For God said, Honor your father and mother, and the
person who speaks against father or mother will certainly be put to death. But you say, ‘If you tell your father or mother, “Everything I’m expected to contribute to you I’m giving to God as a gift,” then you don’t have to honor your father.’ So you do away with God’s Law for the sake of the rules that have been handed down to you” (vv. 3-6).

The practice Jesus referred to was a program the Pharisees had developed to amass economic wealth at the temple. In a time when elderly parents were usually dependent on their families for survival, the Pharisees made a rule that essentially said, “If you give enough money to the temple, you don’t have to use your money to help support your parents.”

This loophole, known as Corban, was being used to nullify the Fifth Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother.”

Jesus denounced this practice of substituting man-made rules for God’s commandments: “Hypocrites! Isaiah really knew what he was talking about when he prophesied about you, This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me. Their worship of me is empty since they teach instructions that are human rules” (vv. 7-9).

Jesus was clear: The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.

He further clarified this truth in verses 10-20: “Jesus called the crowd near and said to them, ‘Listen and understand. It’s not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God’s sight. It’s what comes out of the mouth that contaminates the person’…

“Then Peter spoke up, ‘Explain this riddle to us.’

“Jesus said, ‘Don’t you understand yet? Don’t you know that everything that goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what goes out of the mouth comes from the heart. And that’s what contaminates a person in God’s sight. Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adultery, sexual sins, thefts, false testimonies, and insults. These contaminate a person in God’s sight. But eating without washing hands doesn’t contaminate in God’s sight.”

New Testament scholar William Barclay called this passage in Matthew 15 “one of the most important passages in the whole gospel story.” Why? Barclay believed that, in this passage, Jesus confronts us with “the collision of two views of religion, and two views of the demands of God….

“To the scribes and Pharisees religion was the observance of certain outward rules and regulations and rituals, such as the correct way to wash hands before eating; it was the strict observance of a legalistic outlook on all life. To Jesus, religion was a thing which had its seat in the heart; it was a thing which issued in compassion and kindness, which are above and beyond
the law” (from Barclay’s *The Daily Study Bible Series*). The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart!
  
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