

Friday, March 17, 2023
Season of Lent
Day 21

Matthew 15:1–20

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”

³ Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, ‘Honour your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ ⁵ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’ ⁶ they are not to ‘honour their father or mother’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

⁸ “‘These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

⁹ They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.’”

¹⁰ Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.”

¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”

¹³ He replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

¹⁵ Peter said, “Explain the parable to us.”

¹⁶ “Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them. ¹⁷ “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.”

Reflection

Jesus sets aside a tradition in this section. What is at stake is the issue of defilement. The Pharisees and Lawyers believe they are ‘clean’ because they follow their traditions, which were meant to guard against violating the Law. They believed Jesus was ‘unclean’ because he had violated that tradition. But Jesus proceeds to reinterpret the data. The Pharisees were in fact defiled because they are hypocrites; actors hiding behind their display of piety. They are unclean, not because of what they put into their mouths, but by what comes out of their mouths. Jesus has been slandered by them, they have plotted his death, and there is coming false testimony. Even in this moment they are trying to discredit him by accusing him of being unclean. No matter how much they wash them, their hands are stained.

What this doesn’t mean for us is that all that matters is the “inside.” After all, Jesus is here upholding the Law. His objection is with the interpretation and application of it. The point for us to grasp is that our interior life must be consistent with our exterior life. Is our heart filled with the rule (kingdom) of God? Then that should work out in our actions: extending the kingdom to all no matter how ‘unclean’ they may appear to us. It also means that we have the ongoing work of putting to death our religious false self. This is why in Lent examination and practice go hand in hand. It is an opportunity to purge those actions that are merely religious and attend to the heart ache that leads to such actions.

Prayer

Lord, search us and know us, reveal us to ourselves we pray. Clear away every pretence and action that is for show. Fill our hearts with your rule so that our lives will overflow with the good works of the kingdom. Amen.