

About ...

Religious Traditions



“The Lord says, ‘These people ... honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’ (Isaiah 29:13a)

Who Needs Help?

- ❑ After Jesus called Matthew¹ to follow him, Matthew (a tax collector) invited Jesus to his home for a banquet. A large crowd of tax collectors² and “sinners” ate with them. The Pharisees³ and teachers of the law complained to Jesus’ disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and ‘sinners?’” (*Luke 5:27-30*) How did Jesus respond?

📖 “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”⁴ (*Luke 5:31-32, NIV*)

- ❑ Did Jesus mean that the Pharisees were “healthy” and “righteous?” Do “religious people” need a “doctor?”⁵

Religious Tradition vs. the Will of God

- ❑ Read Matthew 15:1-9. The Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus why his disciples were breaking “the tradition of the elders”⁶ (*15:1-2*). Jesus responded with his own question:

📖 “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” (*15:3, NIV*)⁷

- ❑ Jesus calls the Pharisees “hypocrites,”⁸ and applies the following prophecy to them:

📖 “These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught by men” (*15:8-9, NIV*)



¹ Matthew is called “Levi” in the gospels of Luke and Mark (Mark 2:13-17), and “Matthew” in Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 9:9-13). Double names were common. He may have taken the name Matthew after becoming a follower of Jesus. Matthew was one of Jesus’ twelve disciples and is believed to be the author of the Gospel of Matthew.

² “tax collectors” were disliked because they were agents of the Roman government, and were often dishonest.

³ “Pharisees” – a party within Judaism known for strict observance of the law of Moses and its unwritten interpretations. The “teachers of the law” (most of whom were Pharisees) studied and interpreted the law.

⁴ “repent” – to change one’s mind and life direction; to turn from self-centeredness and sin, toward God and faith.

⁵ The Pharisees would consider themselves to be “healthy” and the “tax collectors & sinners” to be “sick.” Jesus does not challenge the Pharisees’ self-perception on this occasion, but he does on other occasions. According to the Bible, every person is “sick” in a spiritual sense. But only those who admit their sickness and go to the “doctor” will receive the needed treatment. In this passage, the “tax collectors & sinners” are more aware of their true need.

⁶ “the tradition of the elders” refers to the orally transmitted interpretations and applications of the law of Moses (which is found in the Old Testament Scriptures). The Pharisees viewed “the tradition” as having authority nearly equal to the Scriptures. According to their tradition, the “washing of hands” was required for ritualistic purification and cleanness, not merely physical cleanness. “Cleanness” was required for the service and worship of God.

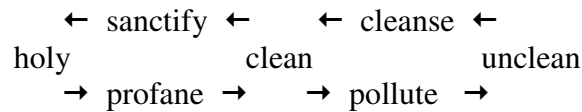
⁷ Jesus quotes Exodus 20:12 (Deuteronomy 5:16) and Exodus 21:17 (Leviticus 20:9), and points out that their tradition conflicts with the will of God expressed in the 10 commandments. In particular, their tradition allowed children to avoid the responsibility of providing for their parents by the practice of “Corban” (Mark 7:11-12). In a binding oath, a son could formerly dedicate “to the temple” money that would have otherwise been used to support his parents. Though dedicated to the temple, other uses of the money were possible, but the parents were excluded.

⁸ “hypocrite” - word derived from the Greek word ὑποκριτής meaning ‘actor.’ A hypocrite puts on a show for others; or plays the part of a character other than his or her true self, either intentionally or unintentionally.

1. How might our religious activity be “in vain” (worthless, meaningless)? How might our religious activity actually conflict with, or oppose, the will of God?⁹ What are examples?

What Really Makes a Person “Unclean?”

❑ Read Matthew 15:10-20. In this passage, the Pharisees and teachers of the law are concerned with ceremonial uncleanness and purification.¹⁰ Though “the [extra-biblical] tradition of the elders” was criticized by Jesus, cleanness and uncleanness *are* important biblical concepts.¹¹



2. What does Jesus say? According to Jesus, what really makes a person “unclean?”¹²

Reflection & Application

➤ In verse 19, Jesus provides a brief list of characteristics that reveal an unclean heart. Of course, there are many others. Consider your own attitudes and actions, and ask yourself: “In what ways is my heart ‘unclean?’ Do I need to see the ‘heart doctor?’”

3. Do you think Jesus is declaring all religious rituals¹³ useless? What about the Jewish laws and rituals found in the Old Testament?¹⁴



4. If the real problem is the human heart (instead of human failure to perform religious activities and rituals), then what is needed to make a person “clean?”¹⁵

Reflection & Application

- Are you attempting to earn God’s acceptance and blessing by your religious activity? The only way to be made “clean” is through faith in Jesus Christ. Have you trusted in him?
- As a “Christian,” are you serving and worshipping God from the heart? Read Romans 12:1-2 and Colossians 3:1-17 and “set your heart on things above” (*Colossians 3:1*).

⁹ From the Christian perspective, much religious activity in this world is “in vain” and opposes God’s will because it is not directed toward the one, true God; and it is not “worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24). However, even “Christians” can be guilty of religious activity that hinders or opposes “true religion” and “true worship” of God.

¹⁰ In addition to the Jewish traditions concerning ritualistic washing, Jewish law considered some foods intrinsically unclean (Leviticus 11). Unclean foods are not the focus of this passage, but Jesus’ response applies to unclean foods.

¹¹ “Cleanness” is directly related to God’s command, “Be holy, because I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44). Something or someone can not be “holy” (set apart for God) without being “clean.” See the diagram taken from Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 19.

¹² While the Pharisees were focused on religious externals, Jesus was concerned with “the heart” (the center of personality; our innermost being). “What comes out of [the] mouth” reveals what is in the heart (15:18; Matthew 12:34). This is not limited to our words (what literally comes out of the mouth), but all of our attitudes and actions.

¹³ “ritual” – “an established and prescribed pattern of observance” (<http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary>)

¹⁴ Christians differ concerning the relationship between the Old Testament law and Christianity (e.g., see *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, edited by Wayne G. Strickland). However, essentially all agree that the ceremonial laws do not directly apply to Christians, because they were fulfilled in Christ (Matthew 5:17). Though Jesus does not explicitly say that the food laws no longer apply, Mark adds this statement to his account: “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean.’” (Mark 7:19). Thus there are no unclean foods for the Christian. But some foods are still unhealthy!

¹⁵ Only God can purify the heart. We desperately need His forgiveness and cleansing available through faith in Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:8-9; Acts 23:16; Titus 3:5-7; Hebrews 10:19-22)