

SERMON: Matthew 15:1-11
WHICH IS HARMFUL—WHAT GOES IN? or WHAT COMES OUT?

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

He answered and said to them, Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God— then he need not honor his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, Hear and understand: Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.

There was a saying fifty years ago in the newly developing computer world: “Garbage in. Garbage out.” The point being, if “garbage” information goes into a computer, “garbage” information will come out. It’s still true, but I haven’t heard that phrase for a long time. On the other hand, there’s the wash machine—dirty clothes go in, clean clothes come out! Everybody knows that. Then again, in our text Jesus makes a point along those same lines regarding “what goes in vs. what comes out.” He’s not talking about computers or wash machines. He’s talking about what is harmful to people’s standing before God.

Jesus had been on the easter (or northeaster) side of the Sea of Galilee, in a remote area with His disciples. He had gone there to be alone with them after He learned that John the Baptist had been beheaded by King Herod. He and His disciples crossed the sea by boat. The crowds also came—by foot. Filled with compassion for them, Jesus put aside His personal desires—as He has done for you and me on the cross—taught them, healed them, and fed them—5000 men plus women and children. That night was the night that He walked out on the water to His disciples who were struggling with the boat against the wind and the waves. By His power, the storm stopped; they safely reached the other side. The next day, was the day of this text. The people again flocked to Him, begging just to touch the edge of His garment for healing. The large crowds, Jesus words, and His astounding miracles irked the Jewish leaders, the scribes, and the Pharisees, in Jerusalem. A delegation from Jerusalem arrived that day. They wanted to deflate His growing popularity. Their ploy was to discredit Jesus in front of the people, to point out a glaring error in His teaching and practice. Surely their intent was also to embarrass Him personally, being called on the carpet by the religious leaders who (as they thought) knew so much more about religious life and teaching.

They confronted Him: “Your disciples break the tradition of our highly respected forefathers, our religious leaders of the past—and You allow them to do it! They do not wash hands before they eat!” Perhaps it seems comical. However, for the Pharisees this was not simply a matter of moms instructing children to wash hands before meals so as to avoid pushing germs directly into their digestive system; or, avoiding a sloppy and unappetizing appearance at the table before others. For the scribes and Pharisees, this was a matter of right and wrong before God! They maintained, as they had been taught, that to eat with unwashed hands was displeasing to God, defiled a man before God, made the man unacceptable to God, and was a sin. Jesus knew that to eat with unwashed hands was NOT a sin before God. It was a manmade tradition. Such a tradition made these people feel they were stepping closer to God; that they were doing good and would be rewarded for it. But it was not so! Do you have traditions that you elevate to a right or a wrong before God? Like going to church even if you’re sick? Do you then feel extra good about yourself? Sorry, it does not earn points before God. Do you feel it’s only a real Christmas if you have a tree, “do” presents, or get snow? Even Christmas traditions can be misapplied as Truths of God.

Jesus responded in that very way: Beware lest your traditions override God's Truth. He turned the tables on His opponents and said, "You religiously follow man-made traditions; you even use man-made traditions to break commands of God! There is a commandment of God [*the 4th, in our numbering*], which says, Honor your father and your mother (Exodus 20:12), as well as the command, that those who curse father or mother [*a highly dishonorable act!*] shall die the death" (Exodus 21:17). Yet you scribes and Pharisees say, If parents need help—financial help—and look to their son; the son, although in a position to help them, can say, by tradition, "I dedicate my wealth as a gift to God ('corban'—'offering'—is the word used in Mark 7:11). Therefore, I'm sorry; I can't help. Look somewhere else." Disgusting, right? To use a man-made tradition to dishonor one's parents and to nullify a command from God! It would be like saying, "Dad/Mom, I can't help you financially right now because I am putting all of my wealth into a trust for the church." "What a good Christian I am!" Or, on Sunday morning seeing someone in distress at the side of the road and saying, "I can't help. I have to get to church for worship. I haven't missed a Sunday all year." "What a good Christian I am!" These are not actions pleasing to God who commands us to love and serve one another. It's all too easy to put man-made tradition ahead of clear commands of God.

Jesus didn't mince any words with the scribes and Pharisees. He said, "Hypocrites!" pretenders / fake religious people! He quoted Isaiah 29:13, "This people draws near to Me with their mouth, and honors me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." It's like a husband who says all the customary and traditionally correct things to his wife, but really has no love for her. To go through the motions, performing man-made religious traditions, is not Christianity at all. Life in Christ is not based on keeping non-Biblical traditions. Life in Christ is not even based on outwardly keeping Biblical commands of God. Such as: Outward murder is bad, but internal hate is ok; outward adultery is bad, but internal lust is ok; public false witness against a neighbor in court of law while under oath is bad, but a little juicy news and small gossip is ok. Christian life is based on trust in Christ the Savior, on the love He has given to you, on the death He has died for you, on the resurrection He has won for you. Christian life is based on Jesus Who loved you first, and pulled you back from the fires of eternal death in hell, by getting "torched" for you on the cross. It grows on the inside. Christ alone has saved you from your guilt and sin, not you yourself nor anyone else. In Christ alone you are washed clean and saved! He changes your heart.

It's not what goes into a man that defiles him before God. It passes through the digestive track and out. Eating with unwashed hands is not a sin before God (unless it's done to spite and disobey your mother.) Celebrating the birth of Jesus on a different day from December 25 is not a sin before God (unless it's done to spite other Christians). Traditions, customs, etc. are just that—man-made rules that seem to be helpful. They never "top" God's Word. Keep God's Word of faith in Christ in your heart. Life in Christ comes from the heart. It's the fruit that is produced by the new man that the Holy Spirit puts within you. In Christian life one is not even conscious of those naturally flowing deeds of love and thanks to the Savior. They are not "planned"; they are not tracked, recorded, and added. What comes out of your heart from the New man, in your day to day life, is naturally done for God and for your fellow man, like fruit on a fruit tree. It's the Old Adam, your sinful nature, on the other hand that defiles your life. The sinful heart, the Old Adam, loves being dirty, and staying dirty. This is reprehensible to God. *Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. (Matthew 15:19). These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man (Matthew 15:20).* Christian life is not simply talking about Garbage in / Garbage out. *It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a mouth.* And we're not just talking about a youngster vomiting on his shirt. We are talking about that which comes out of the sinful heart and then the mouth that is unacceptable to God. Whether one breaks man-made traditions does not defile him before God. The Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus leads you to forgiveness and to produce good fruit. *"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).*

Amen! So be it!

Pastor Kanzenbach--