

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

MATTHEW 15:1-20

IN the verses we are now to consider we are still face to face with the manifestation of opposition to the King. Indeed, prior to the dividing of the ways at Caesarea Philippi, the account of which is found in the next chapter, opposition became more direct, more keen, more systematic.

These Pharisees and scribes constituted a very definite deputation from Jerusalem. They sought Him out with the set purpose of critical consultation, the nature of their question revealed their eagerness and anxiety to draw Him into controversy; their critical attitude was at once manifest.

- The first eleven verses tell us the story of their coming, and of how the Lord dealt with them.
- In the other nine verses we have the account of the conversation of the disciples with Jesus concerning what He had said to the Pharisees, and the way in which He had dealt with them.

In the second verse we have the Pharisees' question. At the close of the section we find that our Lord was still dealing with that subject, though speaking to His disciples.

The fame of Jesus was spreading, and His influence was also spreading among the common people, that is among all the people who did not hold official positions. All sorts and conditions of men were attracted by Christ. Pharisees and publicans mingled oftentimes; the rulers and the ruled were side by side; rich and poor, learned and illiterate followed Him and listened to Him.

The attractive power of Jesus Christ did not lie in the accidentals which appealed to a few; it was rather that of His essential humanity, which found an answer in all human life, notwithstanding the accidentals of birth and position and education. There was growing opposition, but at the same time there was growing attractiveness; and men were crowding after Him, and that, notwithstanding that He was saying things of increasing severity as time went on.

At last this deputation of Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem, and came with a definite problem. The point of their criticism does not appear upon the surface. They asked, "**Why do Thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.**"

Behind this question there lay the essential difference between their religion, and that of Jesus Christ.

It is as though they had said to Him, We are anxious to understand Your position, and the meaning of Your teaching; and we bring You a simple illustration of difference between Your disciples and ours. We are ready to enter into consultation. Is there any way of compromise between us? They did not at the first say how strong was their objection to the attitude of His disciples; that they considered that His disciples were doing wrong. They simply asked a question, Why do Thy disciples eat bread with unwashed hands?

Now, in order to understand Christ's answer, it is necessary to recognize that this was not a question as to cleanliness; it was purely a question of ritual. They were objecting to the fact that His disciples, in their comradeship with Christ, neglected certain ceremonial observances, which they, the Pharisees, held to be of supreme importance.

The whole religious life of Hebraism at this time had become encumbered with ceremonial observances that followed men into all the details of their lives; and these were based upon the interpretation of men, who had added the traditions of the elders to the divinely revealed religion.

This very question of washing before meals was the result of a tradition that Shibta, a demon, sat upon the hands of men as they slept during the hours of the night, and if any person should touch his food with unwashed hands, then that demon sat upon his food and made it dangerous. We are very much inclined to smile at this, but it was the actual teaching of certain of the Rabbis.

The Rabbi Taanith, in consequence of this superstition, taught that:

“Whosoever hath his abode in the land of Israel and eateth his common food with washed hands, and speaks the holy language, and recites his phylacteries morning and evening, he may rest assured that he shall obtain eternal life.”

Gradually religion had degenerated into the observance of such outward ceremonies as these. Men who had taught these things came to Jesus Christ and asked Him, How is it that Your disciples neglect this washing of hands, this ritualistic ceremonial before meals, whereby men may be made sure of eternal life? Thus behind the local and illustrative question, there existed their concern that the disciples of Jesus had violated tradition; and what that meant may be gathered from other Rabbinical teachings.

One of the Rabbis had declared; “The words of the elders are weightier than the words of the prophets.”

While yet another had said, “Some of the words of the law and the prophets are weighty, others are not weighty. All the words of tradition are weighty words.”

Thus the real condition of affairs was that these Pharisees and scribes, who had become the authoritative interpreters of the law of God, had super-added thereto the tradition of elders; indeed they had submerged the law of God beneath tradition; they had actually minimized the value of the law of God and the messages of the prophets in their exaltation of these traditions.

They said in effect, The Scriptures of the Hebrew people are not enough, they must be interpreted; and interpretation in many cases had become contradiction. Out of the midst of their traditions they brought this one illustration of how the disciples of Jesus Christ were violating them.

Our Lord's answer to these men was twofold.

- First, He directly answered the Pharisees;
- Then He called the multitudes to Him, and uttered a very remarkable and solemn word of warning to them about the Pharisees.

He commenced His answer to the Pharisees with the words; "**Why do ye also?**"

Mark the "**also**;" there is tremendous force in it. There was not a single word in Christ's answer that denied that His disciples had violated tradition. So far from denying that they had violated tradition, He vindicated them for doing so. If He had for one single moment said anything, or said what He did say in such a form as to suggest that after all they had not violated tradition, there may have been some excuse for tradition. But He did not, and therefore the set teaching of this passage is against tradition.

He admitted their violation in the word "**also**;" they did not wash their hands, not merely by neglect, but of set purpose. They had swept out of their lives the very things upon which the Pharisees set value.

His whole question to these Pharisees was; "**Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?**" and in that answering inquiry we come to the very heart of the difference between the religion of the Pharisees and the religion of Jesus Christ. He charged them that by their very tradition they had transgressed the commandment of God. His question suggested the inference, that the supreme thing in every life is not human tradition, but God's commandment.

These men had brought an illustration of how His disciples violated tradition. He gave them one of how they, by tradition, violated the Divine Commandment. He said to them in effect; You have a tradition that if a man shall say over anything that he possesses, "**Corban**" that is, it is devoted; or it is a gift to God; in the case of everything so protected, he shall not only not be compelled to minister to the need of his parents, but is forbidden to do so.

Thus the King showed by this supreme and remarkable contrast, how tradition violated the commandment of God to honour father and mother; in that they would allow some mystic word to be pronounced to save a man from obligation; and thus a man was taught by tradition, that he could be religious and true to God, a worshipper, and a man of high principle, while all the while he was violating God's first commandment with promise.

Our Lord did not answer them by dealing first with their own illustration, but by providing another illustration to show how tradition may cause a man to break in upon his relationship to God.

Then by quotation from their own ancient prophecy, which He directly applied to them, He revealed the secret of their failure;

**“Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying,
This people draweth nigh unto Me with their lips,
But their heart is far from Me.
But in vain do they worship Me,
Teaching as their doctrines the commandments of men.”**

Christ’s charge was that it is possible to honour God with the lip while the heart is far from Him.

Then He turned to the multitudes, and, calling them to Him, He rebuked the Pharisees. In the words He uttered to the multitudes we find His condemnation of external religion, and His affirmation of the importance of heart relationship.

Now He took up their own illustration, as He said; the things that enter a man as to his body never defile a man, but the things that come from the center of a man’s essential life are the things that defile.

How revolutionary these words must have sounded in the hearing of the multitudes; how searching even to His own disciples; and how angry they must have made the Pharisees.

- What to eat, and what not to eat;
- What to wear, and what not to wear;
- What to do and what not to do;
- These were trivialities which had become supreme matters in the influence and the teaching of scribes and Pharisees.

In correction the King declared; It is not the thing that a man touches in his physical life that pollutes him. Not that Jesus meant to say that there is no relationship between the physical and spiritual. We must not take a single text and base a false philosophy upon it, or we shall be violating the commandment of God as these men did.

There is the closest relationship between spirit, mind, and body; and this is taught throughout the old and new economies. But when a man thinks he makes himself religious by observing rules which deal only with the physical, he has missed the heart and center of religion; and therefore the King affirmed in the hearing of the multitudes, that it was not the physical thing that entered into the man that defiled him, but the things that came from his heart, the seat of intelligence, and emotion, and will, the spiritual center of a man.

Christ said that from that spiritual center spring all the forces that defile. So that a man may wash his hands not only before meals, but as the Pharisees did, between the courses, a man may be ceremonially clean by the observance of all the traditions of the elders, and yet his heart may be a veritable sink of iniquity, a flowing stream and a river, not polluting himself only, but also the life of family, friends, of the city and the nation.

This was the King's protest against any religion that consists in the observance of externalities; and His affirmation of the fact that nothing makes life pure but inward purity which will influence all the externalities.

After this teaching the disciples came to Jesus, filled with concern. They said, "**Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?**"

There is a very human touch in this; something that makes it very kin to our own age. They seemed to say, The deputation was from Jerusalem, a deputation of elders; they were men of light and learning, and You have offended these men? Perhaps there was a touch of reproach in their question.

Observe what we may describe as the ruthlessness of Christ's answer. There is no pity in the word of Jesus for error, no matter by whomsoever the error may be taught Men who were violating the commandment of God by insisting upon the tradition, men who were hiding that commandment underneath tradition had no place in His pity.

Our Lord said, "**Every plant which My heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up.**" He was not referring to the men, but to the system for which they stood; and in effect He said to His disciples, when they told Him the Pharisees were offended, that He had nothing to do with these Pharisees. He never descended to the level of dealing with men personally in order to hurt and harm them.

The plant of traditional religion God had not planted, and it was His indication of His method with His disciples when He told them that the plants which were not of God's planting must be rooted up. Therefore He said, "**Let them alone: they are blind leaders.**"

That explained what He had done. He had not attacked them; He was not dealing with them as individuals; but with the evil thing in their system and teaching.

- He came, the Truth, to correct error;
- He came, God's own great Vine of life, and light, and love, to destroy the false fungus growths upon religious thinking which were sapping the very life of men and ruining them.

When Peter came and inquired the meaning of the parable, showing how they were astonished at the radical thing Jesus had said, He repeated what He had already said as to the sources of defilement.

Now let us notice the teaching of this section for ourselves.

First, in His dealing with the tradition of the scribes and Pharisees, Christ revealed the perpetual conflict between divine and human religion.

- Human religion is conditioned in externalities, and therefore fails to touch essential life.
- Divine religion begins in essential life, and from that center governs the last externality.

There is perpetual difference. It is manifest all through the New Testament, and when we come to the teaching of the Epistles we find it specially emphasized.

If we take the Galatian Epistle, the charter of Christian liberty, it sets at nought the idea that any man may be made spiritual by fleshly observance; and insists upon the necessity for spiritual relationship, if there is to be spiritual purity.

The difference between human and divine religion is always seen in this respect.

In all heathen religions, religion and morality are divorced. This is the supreme test of religion. Is our religion a thing of the heart, a communion between our inner life and God, a force that drives us to the watch-tower in the morning to catch the gleam of the glory of the pathway of His feet, a passion that sends us back to Him with shame and disgust when we have sinned? That is the true religion.

If Jesus in all the virtue of His life and love sits sentinel in our heart we shall guard our lips, and be careful as to what we eat or drink; but it is not the things that enter in, but the things that come out of the center which defile the man. That is the perpetual test. Christ's estimate concerning tradition must be ours also. Wherever tradition violates the commandment of God, it is to be violated. And every plant which God has not planted must be rooted up.

Tradition still binds us very largely. We have super-added very much in our Christian life to the simplicity of Jesus Christ. Man is naturally, unless he be very careful, the slave of tradition.

In certain parts of Wales people will not lay the bodies of their loved ones to final resting-places save as they are enswathed in flannel, because in a certain reign a law was passed that this should be done for the purpose of giving a new impetus to the flannel industry. There was a reason for the practice once; but the reason has become a tradition, and these people would think they were irreligious if they violated the tradition.

What tradition binds us? Are we bound by a tradition that it is a good thing to read our Bible every morning? Break through it if there is nothing more in such reading than the observance of a tradition. If we are simply the slaves of tradition, even though the tradition may have had its foundation in a reason, the tradition becomes a barrier that shuts us out from God.

There are some persons, for instance, who are so harmed by the traditions of public worship that all the warmth, and soul, and force of public worship fails to touch them.

There are people to whom the tradition of Church relationship has no other value than that of the lightning-conductor to a building.

It serves to catch the electric force and carry it off, so that it never touches the building.

Our King desires to bring every man from the bondage of everything, into living touch with God.

Everything that separates between us and God, though it be the most religious and sanctified thing by old associations, we had better sweep it away.

- The very sacred Supper of the Lord may become such a tradition as to shut us out of communion with Jesus Christ.
- The very ceremony of sacred and reverent worship may become a door that bars us from communion;
- The very conventionalities of our respectability may become the traditions that exclude us from God.

There must be personal and direct heart relationship with God.

Let us therefore be very much afraid of any system of religion that declares that anything more is needed for the cultivation of religious life than the commandment of God. Any interpretation of men becomes at last a tradition. Any exposition which is human, when you lift it into a necessity becomes a curse. There is a place for exposition, there is a place for interpretation, there is a place for teaching; but the interpretation and the exposition, and the teaching, must never be made essential.

The essential thing is the commandment of God, and lest our interpretations, and expositions, and traditions, should violate that commandment, let us guard our souls, and let us see to it that we stand first in relationship with God.

In true religion there is no room for anything between the spirit of a man and the flaming Spirit of God, and whether the thing between be priest, or sacrament, or ceremony, or observance, it must be swept out,

“Nothing between, Lord, nothing between,”

is the cry of the true worshipper, and when that cry is answered, then there is religion which will immediately affect all the externalities. Let us be very much afraid of externalities, lest they seduce us from spiritual worship. Let us very jealously cultivate spiritual worship that it may affect and govern all the externalities of life.

~ end of chapter 44 ~

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