

## Prayer

Joy comes afresh into our hearts, Lord Jesus, when we realise that the constancy and faithfulness you show us throughout our lives will never change. Make us so secure in Your love that whatever evils stand in our way, we need never fear; for You are with us, and the demons flee! Praise You, Lord Jesus, for ever and ever. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Fire Services

*Pray for those countries where substantial numbers of people live in areas at risk from severe fires. Pray for the fire services there, and for their adequate funding and support.*

### On-going prayers

- Give thanks for God's protection for you and your family
- Pray for President Obama as he deals with issues in the Middle East
- Pray about population growth and the moral issues it raises

## Meditation

If you see someone who is in tears and distress,  
In the name of Jesus, give help!

If you listen to someone who has been misled,  
In the name of Jesus, tell the truth!

If you talk with someone who boasts of what they know,  
In the name of Jesus, don't believe them!

If you work alongside those who swear using God's name,  
In the name of Jesus, object!

If you come across someone who is searching their soul,  
In the name of Jesus, explain the faith!

If you give time to a friend who has lost their way,  
In the name of Jesus, show them where to go!

## Bible Study - Matthew 15:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup> 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat food.' <sup>3</sup> He answered them, 'And why do you break the commandment of God yourselves? <sup>4</sup> For God said, "Honour your father and your mother," and, "Whoever curses father or mother must be put to death." <sup>5</sup> But you say that whoever tells their father or mother, "The support I might have given you is given to God," <sup>6</sup> has no need to honour his parents. So you disregard the Word of God for the sake of your tradition!

<sup>7</sup> Hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you in this way:

<sup>8</sup> "These people give me lip service,  
but their heart is far from me;

<sup>9</sup> They worship me in vain,

teaching human rules as doctrine.”

<sup>10</sup> He called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: <sup>11</sup> it is not what goes into the mouth that makes a person unclean; however, a man is defiled by what comes out of his mouth!'

## Review

It is not surprising to find the Pharisees challenging Jesus again after a couple of significant incidents during this central phase of his ministry. The feeding of the five thousand (14:13-21) and the 'walking on the water' (14:22-33) describe Jesus' powerful work with the crowds and the disciples, and they attracted the interest of the authorities, just as His earlier work had done (9:34f.). Most commentaries on Matthew's Gospel say that today's passage has no connection with these surrounding stories; but Matthew was a master story teller. If you have followed recent studies and the tension surrounding this 'middle phase' of Jesus' ministry, then you will be expecting some form of dispute with the authorities again. Jesus had not stood back after previous disputes, if anything He was acting with greater boldness and purpose.

Today, we read about a direct challenge to Jesus' authority from the Jerusalem Pharisees. They were not interested in discussing the details of any recent incidents or other reports, and proceeded to put to Him their immediate concern, that His disciples did not keep the 'traditions of the elders' (15:2) concerning ritual purity. From their point of view, this was an offence to God, not to them personally, and they were right to point this out to Jesus, as if it was a flaw in His teaching.

Jesus' response to this challenge informed the Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes that without question, He would not compromise on His teaching; He insisted that He was right in His teaching and that they were wrong, moreover, the Jewish people in general were living a lie because of what they had been taught by the Pharisees (15:5,6)! It was a stunning rebuke, complete with quote from Isaiah, the one prophet quoted most often by Jesus. His last criticism of the Pharisees was the sharpest, however, because He told them that they had completely misunderstood the ritual purity laws of God and misinterpreted their purpose. What separated people from God was not what they ate or how they ate it, but what was stored in the heart, as evidenced by what they said. These words are important because they form the basis of our Christian understanding of sin, and have done so for centuries; moreover, what is taught about this in the rest of the New Testament (in the letters of Paul, for example) has helped form our understanding of Christian morality and action.

It is noticeable that the confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees were becoming sharper as time went by. Matthew 12 records the breakdown of Jesus' relationship with local Pharisees and scribes at the conclusion of the first phase of His ministry around Capernaum and Lake Galilee. Following this, Jesus needed to press on with teaching the disciples about what was to come, extending their faith, and leading them to a greater understanding of His own divinity (chapters 13 and 14). He also continued to minister to the crowds, teaching them by means of parables and healing those who came to Him. Not far from the surface, however, His dispute with the Pharisees was simmering. It would not be long before it would surface again!

The local Pharisees had come to the conclusion that Jesus was motivated by demonic powers, not God (12:22f.), so it is not surprising that they should report this to their senior colleagues in the capital, Jerusalem, and it is not surprising that they should send a deputation to quiz Jesus. Their job was to validate the reports they had heard, and they began by asking Jesus a question designed to test His allegiance to Judaism; they did not

Scripture even to this day; but the Christian must make the choice to submit to Jesus' ways, and base their understanding of God's Word on Him, and Him alone.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Is there any legalism like that in our passage within the church today? What can be done about it?
2. Have you developed 'ways of doing things' which have become 'sacred' for you, but are really nothing to do with your faith in Jesus?
3. Are there any issues today that are similar to the denial of elderly people of their due care in old age, just as Jesus points out in our reading today?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*There are times when I have realised that my ministry has reflected ritual rather than faith, and I have found it hard to sort out the issues involved. I have discovered, for example, that I have used prayers in a ritualistic way rather than a truly meaningful way, or I have assumed that by keeping things right according to the standing orders of my own church then I am doing what is right for God. It has always been tough to deal with such matters. There are no easy options, except that Scripture remains the best guide to God's will.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Ask the Lord to help you get your priorities right in all you do at home and at work. This is a difficult but important question to ask, especially when you intend to follow through what the Lord tells you to do!*
- *Pray for all who are uncertain about where they stand in discerning the difference between church laws and God's laws. Pray that they will be helped to do what is right.*

## Final Prayer

Almighty God and Father, may nothing that has happened today so overwhelm me that I lose sight of Your guidance and grace, and may nothing prevent me from coming into Your presence and finding peace; through Jesus Christ my Lord, AMEN.

unclean, but what comes out of the mouth!' One can imagine this may well have raised a great laugh; the unpopular religious Pharisees were constantly trying to lay heavier burdens of what they called 'ritual law' upon people, much of it concerning eating and washing before meals, and Jesus had mocked these ridiculous rules. There is no doubt that the crowds preferred what came out of Jesus' mouth to what came out of the Pharisees' mouths! Jesus' brand of practical love had far more appeal to working people than the so-called purity rules of the religious!

We, of course, read this parable in the way that Matthew probably meant it, as a confirmation that what determines purity in God's eyes and should do so in the eyes of everyone else, is the heart. The reason for this is simple, the heart governs what a person says, and what they eat and how they eat it is a totally different matter. This was, in truth, what was taught by other rabbis in Jesus' time (rabbis Johanan and Zakkai, for example, for whom we have records of what they taught), but Jesus' teaching was consistent with His own declaration, the Sermon on the Mount (5:21-28). The difference between Jesus and the other rabbis who taught this was that Jesus was prepared to follow through the full consequences of His teaching as the truth of God, and eventually, He died because of His implacable opposition to what was demonstrably false within Judaism.

Tomorrow, we will find out how Jesus explained the whole episode to the disciples. At this point in the Gospel of Matthew, we should expect that Jesus did indeed have more to say to them about this as He taught them the 'secrets of the Kingdom'.

### Application

This passage speaks directly to us today in the same way that Matthew intended it to speak to the Early Church; basically, the 'heart' is more important than religious legalism. We can also conclude that when we look properly at the details of Scriptural text, as Jesus does here within Matthew Gospel, the Old Testament stands as the true Word of God and as fulfilled by Jesus. However, the traditions which we allow ourselves to build up around it, for whatever (apparently) good reason are no substitute for the revelation of God, whether by His Word and through Christ.

We do not have a problem with ritual washing today, or anything quite like it. Cleanliness is one thing, and being 'pure' before God is mostly quite another! However, Jesus' words still have great power for those who will hear them. Tradition is important for any group of people, and Christian tradition has an important part to play in the Church, providing it directly reflects the historic teachings of Scripture and the life of Christ. It is too easy for people to develop rituals and practices that operate just like the 'laws' of purity that Jesus ridiculed in our text today. Unfortunately, some people will claim things to be 'tradition' when they are seeking to impose a ritual standard upon everyone, as the Pharisees did in their day. Watch out for this! However, we should never, ever. Discard the proper traditions of Christian faith, such as reading the Bible, or praying, or meeting together to do God's will and worship Him!

Today's passage tells us that the Pharisees who came from Jerusalem learned what they needed to know about the teaching of Jesus. He was implacable in His rigorous approach to the Scriptures, and dismissive of human attempts to apply it and then oblige people to follow this as if it was Scripture itself! By standing against the traditions of the Pharisees, Jesus placed Himself in harm's way, for the Pharisees had been sent to report to Jerusalem. Their report hastened the day when Jesus would have to answer to the Sanhedrin and be put on trial for blasphemy. Underneath the whole argument in our text lies the issue of Jesus' authority to interpret and fulfil God's Word, because He was the 'Son of God'. We can either accept this ourselves, or attempt to do what we like with

get the reply they expected or wanted, indeed, they would probably have taken offence at what Jesus said.

After His previous arguments with Pharisees, Jesus did not 'mince his words' in speaking to these emissaries from Jerusalem; addressing them with all the penetrating wisdom of the Son of God. Tomorrow we will see what the disciples made of all this, and how they exercised the privilege of their relationship with Jesus to obtain an explanation of what He had said.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- What did the Pharisees mean by asking this question (15:1,2)?
- What does Jesus' reply mean (15:3-6)?
- What does the quote from Isaiah mean in this context (15:7-9)?
- What can we learn from Jesus brief parable (15:10,11)?

### Notes on the text and translation

**V2** *'before they eat food'* This is a more helpful way of translating the phrase than following the Greek literally, which says, 'whenever they eat bread' (which you will find in the new King James, for example). Clearly, hands are washed before the eating, and the Greek for 'bread' was in those days, a general word for food.

**V3** *'why do you break the commandment of God yourselves'* Other translations do not have the last word 'yourselves', which gives emphasis to what Jesus says, directing this at the scribes and Pharisees. However, it is there in the Greek, and should not, in my opinion, be left out.

**V4** *"honour your father and mother"* This is clearly what the commandment in Exodus 20 says, and what we expect. However, the Greek here actually says 'honour the father and the mother', which is a form of generalisation. I feel it right to add the word 'your', as do most translators, for the phrase to make sense in English.

**V6** *'has no need to honour his parents'* This phrase is not straightforward. The Greek, whilst earlier speaking of both father and mother, only mentions 'father' here, but I have dealt with this discrepancy by referring to 'parents'. The phrase begins with an emphatic negative, which in this context means 'there is no need to ...' The clause follows on from the beginning of verse 5.

**V6** *'You disregard the Word of God for the sake of your tradition.'* This phrase is a little unclear in Greek, because some of the ancient manuscripts, indeed, some of the most ancient, read like this 'You disregard the commandment of God ...' Clearly, this refers back to the specific commandment of honouring father and mother. However, because Jesus makes a general point here, most scholars prefer the version found in other manuscripts that say 'Word of God'. Apart from this assumption, it is almost impossible to say which ancient text copies the original!

### Going Deeper

#### **What did the Pharisees mean by asking this question (15:1,2)?**

The question raised by the Pharisees went to the heart not just of Jesus' differences with the Jewish authorities, but of religious arguments in Jesus day between Jews themselves. It also dealt with ethical questions which were important to the Early Church.

When we read what the Pharisees asked about ritual washing (15:2), we immediately think that the message of this passage will turn out to be about Jesus' rejection of the 'Law'.

This was something that had already arisen within Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (5:17ff) and His earlier controversies with the local Pharisees (12:1-14) which had doubtless been reported to headquarters in Jerusalem. We should already know from the Gospel that Jesus fulfilled the scriptures of the Old Testament, and the whole of Matthew is based upon the premise that Jesus perceived that His own ministry was a fulfilment of what the prophets had said, especially Isaiah. (Matthew frequently quotes Isaiah in his explanations of the actions of Jesus - see 3:3, 4:14, 8:17, 12:17, 13:14, 15:7). The reason why Jesus was frequently at loggerheads with the Pharisees was because they interpreted the 'Law' (the first five books of the Bible, or 'Torah') according to the traditions they had developed on the basis of the law, and this included a variety of spoken and written sources. Jesus, however, interpreted the Law by reference to the 'Prophets'. In other words, He used scripture to interpret scripture, and rejected Jewish tradition as the interpretation of scripture and the Law. Consequently, what Jesus rejected was the Jewish interpretation of the Law, but not Scripture itself; it would be quite wrong to suggest, as some do even today, that Jesus rejected either the Old Testament or the Law within it. To say this shows an ignorance of what Jesus did and said in His own lifetime.

Much of our reading today could be thought of as a predictable response by Jesus to the question of the ritual washing of hands before people ate, given what we already know of His teaching; He challenged the principle behind the question (15:3-9) before giving a straight answer with His own opinion (15:10,11). However, the question itself exposed divisions not just between Jesus and the Pharisees, but the Pharisees and other Jews, which we need to understand. The ancient Levitical laws (Ex 30:17-21 and Lev 15:11 etc) concerned the ritual washing of priests before they performed sacrifices, and the same rules applied to people who had been cleansed from diseases and 'bodily discharges'. There is nothing else about ritual washing in Scripture, and it was certainly not demanded every time someone ate. We know that the body of Jewish tradition, called the Mishnah, contained laws that required washing before eating, but this was written in the second century AD. At the time of Jesus however, the Pharisees were in dispute with the Sadducees about the imposition of ritual washing before eating. The Sadducees did not agree with doing this, and because the Pharisees were becoming ever more powerful, they were able to 'make' tradition out of their own beliefs and impose this on everyone else. When they talked of the 'tradition of the elders' (152), this was their way of talking about their own traditions, which were certainly not those of common people or other Jewish sects! Jesus knew this, so first and foremost, His response challenged the Pharisees' power before addressing the question directly.

It is also worth remembering that the Early Church was divided concerning ritual laws of purity, of which we have a hint in Paul's writings (e.g. Romans 14, 1 Cor 8). Matthew may well have reported Jesus' teaching about such matters through this text, informing the Church that He would have nothing to do with the traditional purity laws.

#### ***What does Jesus' reply mean (15:3-6)?***

So Jesus' reply (15:3-6) to the Pharisees was cleverly designed. The gist of what Jesus said is clear. Tradition could not be a guide to the Law of God if it appeared to invalidate what was written in scripture. This is clear enough from verses 3 to 6, which concludes with this defining statement 'you disregard the word of God for the sake of your tradition'. Note that Jesus emphasised 'your' tradition; He did not regard what the Pharisees taught as His tradition as a Jew Himself, and it is probable that the crowds around Him also felt the same. It is something we may not have considered today, but is certainly worth our attention; Jesus probably received considerable popular support for His stand against the Pharisees!

The example Jesus used to make His point is interesting. He spoke about the abuse of scripture caused by a wrongful tradition that had grown up in recent times within Judaism, and it was something that touched on the way that elderly people were treated within Judaism. Firstly, Scripture confirms within the 4 Ten Commandments that 'father and mother' are of highest priority for people (Ex 20:12, Deut 5:16). However, in Jesus' day, a practice had arisen whereby people declared sums of money as 'corban', which means that the money was dedicated to God. This was a means of devoting money or gifts to the Temple authorities in Jerusalem for the building of the Temple there, and the Pharisees said that giving such a gift was more important than people's duties according to the Ten Commandments! We can follow Jesus' logic about the evil of this quite clearly!

What was going on was this; Herod the Great had started the Temple that stood in Jesus' day before He was born, but it was not finished or paid for by the time He died! Many Jewish people made special 'corban' declarations as a form of promise to future giving, to ensure that the project would be completed. Consequently, many aged people were suffering because the family money that would have been spent on them was disappearing to Jerusalem! There was much resentment amongst ordinary folks at this practice, and the fact that the Pharisees advocated it. Documents from Jesus' day show this, and readily indicate the social problems it caused. Nevertheless, all this went against not just the written Laws of God, and also its principles, as is readily expressed in this proverb; 'anyone who robs father or mother and says, "That is no crime," is partner to a thug.' (Proverbs 28:24 - see also Ex 21:17).

#### ***What does the quote from Isaiah mean in this context (15:7-9)?***

As if to emphasize the principles by which He interpreted and fulfilled scripture, Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13 in verses 8 and 9. The prophets had spoken clearly that the 'heart' was the source of the purity God was looking for in people, not ritual activities. Jeremiah had reached this conclusion (Jer 31:31ff) during the siege of Jerusalem around 590BC, and Hosea did the same when he said 'I desire steadfast love (mercy) not sacrifice' (Hos 6:6). Neither prophet countenanced abandoning God's Law, but they identified the spirit that lay behind it.

The remarkable thing is that this quote from Isaiah may be considered as a summary of Isaiah's message from the first half of his prophecies (chapters 1 to 35). Throughout this large volume of work Isaiah emphasised again and again the uselessness of rituals without people's personal and collective dedication to Almighty God, and Isaiah had personally received a message from God that told him the people of Israel would not comprehend what God required for them, however it was put to them (Isaiah 6:10f.). This was what led Isaiah to prophesy that God would have to work through a new 'king' (9:1f. 11:1f.) who we discover in the second half of that great prophet to be a 'suffering servant'. Jesus was not merely quoting Isaiah for effect. He was quoting Isaiah to tell them to 'watch this space' for the fulfilment of Isaiah's greatest prophecies; something He would do, personally.

#### ***What can we learn from Jesus brief parable (15:10,11)?***

Jesus answered the question posed to Him not by speaking to those who had asked the question, but by appealing to the crowds He had recently healed and taught, and whom He had just fed (14:13-21). Jesus did not neglect their needs even though He was trying to develop a special ministry to the disciples, and so they were probably on His side in this dispute with the Pharisees. Jesus was still on home territory, and the Jerusalem envoys were severely exposed!

So it was that after dealing with the Jerusalem Pharisees' ignorant question, Jesus turned to the crowds to give His final 'riposte' to the whole issue of ritual purity. It was to them, not the Pharisees that He said, it is not what goes into someone's mouth that makes them