

Prayer

We thank You, our loving God and Father, for the infinite number of ways in which You are constantly working to make life on our planet enjoyable, adventurous and exciting; not just for Christians, but for everyone. Give us, Your servants, the understanding and sensitivity to take advantage of every feature of life here on earth, and so prove to all our belief that You are a God of love. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Finance

Pray today for the people who are responsible for international finance, people in banks, and also people who govern international financial institutions, such as the IMF.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for the gift of love and those who love you
- Pray for Great Britain and its current political instability
- Lift up to God in prayer the plight of those affected by drought

Meditation

Let the Spirit of liberty free your eager soul

To explore the wisdom and the love of God:

Let the Spirit of renewal inspire your willing heart

To give you the purpose and direction you need:

Let the Spirit of fire descend on the memory of your past

To burn spiritual rubbish and leave pure gold:

Let the Spirit of penitence touch your innermost being

To focus your life on the Lord, not on yourself:

Let the Spirit of compassion fill your considerate hearts

To love the unlovely and offer care to all:

Let the Spirit of unity burst into your consciousness

To remind you anew of your place in Christ's body:

Let the Spirit of prayer consume your waking hours

To refresh spiritual love for your eternal Redeemer:

Let the Spirit of God do His work in you now.

Bible Study - Matthew 15:12-20

¹² Then the disciples came to Him and asked, 'Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard what you said?' ¹³ He replied, 'Any plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Leave them alone; they are blind guides of the blind; and if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.'

¹⁵ Then Peter asked, 'Explain this parable to us.' ¹⁶ Jesus said, 'Do you not understand, even now? ¹⁷ Can you not see that whatever goes in the mouth passes into the stomach, and is passed into the latrine. ¹⁸ However, what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and these make a man unclean. ¹⁹ The heart is the source of evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual

immorality, theft, false witness, and slander; ²⁰ these are what make a man unclean. It does not make a man unclean to eat with unwashed hands.'

Review

The remarkable thing about Jesus here is that He was able to give His full attention to the disciples whilst the pressure on Him from both the crowd and the Pharisees was intense. Whilst Jesus was attempting to move His ministry forwards by spending more time with the disciples, Pharisees from Jerusalem had sought Him out in southern Galilee. They had come to test the reports they had heard about Him from local Pharisees, because the things He was saying were radically opposed to their own plans for the religious development of the country, yet Jesus appeared to be very popular and very dangerous.

At the beginning of chapter 15, the Pharisees had posed a question about ritual hand-washing to Jesus, and He answered by challenging the very basis of their religious life and then answered the question with a casual quip (15:10-11) which was probably intended to amuse. Jesus had no time for ritual hand-washing but was concerned about people's hearts, and about what they said and did. The disciples, however, had been watching all this, and they showed Jesus they had been paying close attention to what was going on by asking Him directly about what was going on.

To begin with, the disciples saw that the Pharisees were offended, and told Jesus about it (15:12). Perhaps they were concerned that Jesus' treatment of them might have unhelpful consequences. They had influence in the highest religious court of the land, the Sanhedrin, and if they felt that Jesus was not teaching what was right, they had the power to accuse Him of false teaching, or even worse, bring charges of blasphemy. However, Jesus stood above all this; He knew who the Pharisees were, and He knew what report they would bring and its consequences. Indeed, it will shortly become evident that Jesus was well aware of what would happen to Him in Jerusalem (16:21). Therefore, He dismissed the Pharisees and their project to control Judaism with a further trivializing comment; 'Any plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted' (15:13), and added words that are now famous as a description of irrelevance, calling them 'blind guides' (15:14).

In the remainder of our passage, Jesus continued to focus on the disciples and answer their questions. First, Peter asked Jesus 'explain this parable to us'; however, it is unclear what he meant, because it seems on first reading that he might be referring to what Jesus had just said in verses 13 and 14. However, we discover from Jesus' reply (15:16f.) that he was really asking about what Jesus had said earlier about what makes a person 'unclean';

'Listen and understand: 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!' (15:10,11)

It is interesting that although this comment of Jesus was utterly straightforward, the disciples thought it was a parable and were looking for some special meaning within it! Jesus' quickly corrected their misunderstanding, and spoke plainly to them about the human sin and evil that comes from the heart. His list of examples in verse 19 is remarkably similar to Paul's lists of evils, such as the 'works of the flesh' in Galatians 5:16f. and confirms that these evils are truly damaging; we will look at the reasons for this later.

It is very important that we have all this recorded in Matthew's Gospel, for without these words of Jesus, people might be more easily tempted to use the Old Testament laws of cleanliness and ritual purity today. As it is, Jesus' correction of the disciples helps us know that the heart of God longs for His people to be 'clean' not through ritual but through what they say and do. Jesus has fulfilled the ritual requirements of the law, and consequently, God looks for us to be faithful and obedient to Him, and He wants us to work with Him to

faith, and which end up quenching the Spirit or distracting us from our worship or our discipleship.

Jesus also gives us His insight into the problems of harbouring evil intentions that can lurk within the human heart, particularly of leaders, and which bear fruit in unspeakably evil acts sometimes within our own midst. In my own ministry, I have dealt with circumstances in which leaders of the church have indeed become embroiled in sexual intrigues, slander, false witness, and even the kind of character assassination that can all but destroy people. I find these things extraordinary. When we find such things within the church of God, then there is something very wrong. I do believe that the only way to deal with these things is to expose them ruthlessly by applying the same standards of honesty that Jesus used in this scripture. He would not stand for the way that the Pharisees destroyed the work of God, and if we see things within the church that prevent God's work being done, we should stand against it, for the ultimate good of the Kingdom.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Can you give examples of those who have been 'blind guides' of God's people down through the ages?
2. Do our words (what comes out of the mouth) always reveal what is in our hearts? Do think carefully about this question and give examples.
3. If you were to make a list of 'evil intentions' which corrupt people, what would you put on the list?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The issue of the purity laws is not something that directly affects people today, though it is worth remembering that people do indeed have considerable sensibilities about food today, and these ought to be properly considered in a godly light. The challenge of Jesus which exposes the thoughts of the heart is however of a different order, and a significant challenge to us all. Certainly, there are times in my past when I have had to examine myself very carefully when I have not been right before God. None of us is immune from needing such examination of the heart.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Look at the list of evil intentions that the heart harbours (15:19) to see if any of these afflicts you now or in the past. It is difficult to do this, but potentially important. Deal with any problems prayerfully and with other people's assistance.*
- *Get together with a group of friends and pray for the leaders of your church. Pray specifically that they may be able to guide God's people in a scriptural and godly manner, in all things.*

Final Prayer

Give me a voice, Lord God, to declare Your works, to preach Your Gospel and defend the faith. May I have the courage to do this for You alone and not give the impression that I do this to gain any heavenly reward, for I long to contribute to the growth of Your Kingdom; AMEN

bleed others in the world, without being dominated by any sin that may creep into our lives. This is a message we need to take to heart.

Going Deeper

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

- Why did Jesus rebuke the Pharisees so strongly?
- Why did Peter ask about the parable?
- Problems for the human heart

Notes on the text and translation

V14 *'they are blind guides of the blind'* Some Bible versions have only 'they are blind guides'. This is because the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament are unclear about whether the words 'of the blind' are in fact original to the text. Because it makes little difference to the text, most people accept that the translation given here is correct.

V15 *'explain this parable to us'* Strangely, the Greek text is unclear about whether the word 'this' is present. You may think that this means little, but when the disciples say these words, our immediate assumption can be that they are talking about what Jesus has just said (verses 13,14). However, as we find out, their question is about what Jesus said earlier in verse 11.

V17 *'and is passed into the latrine'* Most translations avoid speaking about the latrine, but this word is present in the Greek. It could be translated 'toilet', but the latrines available in Jesus' day were rather different to those of today, and using this word reminds us of this rather obvious fact.

V19 *'the heart is the source of ...'* The normal translation is this 'out of the heart come ...'. However, the Greek word used here for 'come' can mean 'originate from' and so I have utilised this to emphasise the heart as the 'source' of evil thoughts etc.

Going Deeper

Why did Jesus rebuke the Pharisees so strongly?

Within the whole of chapter 15, it would be easy to forget the fact that the question originally asked of Jesus by the Jerusalem Pharisees was about the ritual of hand-washing. They wanted to know why Jesus did not teach the disciples to do this as part of the 'traditions of the elders' (15:2). The Pharisees naturally regarded themselves as good teachers who were faithful to Jewish tradition, and questioned why Jesus was not. In His reply, Jesus questioned the validity of this tradition and exposed the teaching of the Pharisees as a sham, and unrelated to Scripture. He strongly implied what everyone knew, that the Pharisees were trying to impose their own version of 'tradition' upon the Jewish people simply because they had the power so to do (see my notes on the previous text for details). It was no more than religious politics at their worst.

When the disciples raised their concern for the feelings of the Pharisees (15:12), their question indicated that the Pharisees knew exactly what Jesus was doing. They were offended because Jesus had found the flaw in their argument and exposed it; but the disciples were more worried about personal reactions than the truth. This could well explain the irritation in Jesus' voice as he spoke to them later on (see 'do you not understand, even now' – verse 15). Jesus had no qualms in speaking the truth about the Father, and reinforced this to the disciples with a stunning denunciation of the Pharisees. Firstly, He described the Pharisees as plants that the Father had not planted, and would therefore be uprooted (15:13). Israel's identity as 'a plant that God had planted' was a well known Biblical image, as Isaiah indicates in his prophecy, 'They are the shoot I have

planted, the work of my hands, for the display of my splendour' (Is 60:21). Jesus' words therefore questioned the place of the Pharisees within the people of God, and His prophecy of their 'uprooting' (15:13) indicates that they would have no part to play in the future Kingdom. Jesus was not about to give an apology for hurting people's feelings, to people who stood in the way of God's will for all people.

Jesus then summed up the situation with these words 'they are blind guides of the blind'. This is now a famous saying, and most of us know it in the form 'the blind leading the blind', and we use the expression to describe the ultimate failure of leadership that has lost sight of where it has come from and where it is going! The consequences of such blindness however are tragic; for example, the Bible gives us a number of illustrations in which people 'dig holes' through doing evil, and consequently fall into the holes they have dug (Ps 7:15, Prov 26:27, Is 24:18, Jer 48:44). Jesus' words go further than this. These spiritually blind people, the Pharisees, would not just hurt themselves but pull the people of Israel down with them into the 'pit' of God's judgement. It is a devastating condemnation.

The Jerusalem Pharisees may well have concluded that what they had heard from local reports about Jesus was true, and more besides. They may well have felt they needed to hear no more.

Why did Peter ask about the parable?

Clearly, the disciples had not understood Jesus properly, and Peter spoke to try and clarify the situation, asking 'explain this parable to us' (15:15). As we have already seen, it is uncertain which 'parable' he was talking about: the original one Jesus told about 'what goes into the mouth' when answering the Pharisees' original question ' (15:10,11), the picture parable from scripture about the 'plant' of Israel (v13) or the cutting parable of the 'blind' leadership of God's people by the Pharisees. If we have followed what happened we will realise that whatever Peter meant by asking this (and it remains unclear to us what he thought he was asking), Jesus answered Peter by going back to the original question about hand-washing and the ritual purity laws concerning what people ate.

It is significant that Matthew reports Peter as asking this question, when in Mark 7:1-7, all the disciples are said to ask it. This may not simply be a matter of Peter representing the disciples however, because understanding these issues would prove to be important for the development of the early church, and one day, Peter would be its leader. Jesus knew that Peter would have to deal with this issue in years to come. The first converts to the 'Way' of Christianity were Jews from Jerusalem and from the wider Diaspora (dispersion) of Jews around the world. Quite soon after Pentecost, however, Gentiles were touched by God's Spirit and became Christians as well, and Peter, as the head of the infant Church in Jerusalem, was led by God to investigate whether the Gentile converts, who ate unclean foods, were acceptable within the church. Acts 10 and 11 record an amazing vision given to Peter that led him to accept 'all foods' as clean, and consequently accept a Gentile man named Cornelius into the church. With this action, Peter began the important process whereby the church of God was opened up for all believers. The historic consequences of Peter's decisions about this are incalculable, and at this moment, Jesus prepared him for what he had to do later on.

When Matthew wrote a Gospel of Jesus Christ for his local church, it is not surprising that he highlighted Peter's role in establishing that Jewish purity and eating regulations were not part of God's plan for His people. The sheer strength of Jesus' comment to Peter about this is highly significant. He said that all food ended up being passed 'into the latrine', and we are left in no doubt that in God's future kingdom, what people eat would be irrelevant. This is something we should bear in mind today, because a number of Christian groups would like to insist to us today that we should eat only in certain ways, from raw vegetables only (as in Genesis 1) or meat only without blood (as in the Old Testament). We need to

ask ourselves whether it is right to test God again concerning something He has already taught us about through Jesus.

Problems for the human heart

Jesus went on (15:18-20) to illustrate what He had meant about the real evil and impurity that could come from a person's mouth, meaning the words that reflect the human heart. It is possible that just as the disciples had observed the offence taken by the Pharisees (15:12), some people thought Jesus' words were somewhat strong, perhaps even insulting. However, His intentions were not evil, they were just and true, and Jesus was concerned at what was going on around Him. He could see that people were thinking and imagining all manner of things because of what He had said, and the list of evils that come 'from the heart' (15:19) reflects His concern.

The list is an extraordinary condemnation of what sinful humanity can do, and it is a rare glimpse into Jesus' understanding of human nature. The first item on His list was 'evil intentions', and this was a reasonable description of what the Pharisees were feeling and perhaps expressing to each other. The Gospel leaves us in no doubt that all the attention they gave to Jesus was part of a plot to 'murder' Him (12:14), which would involve 'false witness' (26:60) and 'slander' (26:62-68). As to the other items on Jesus' list, He had just been reminded (14:1-12) of the salacious sexual intrigues surrounding Herod's court, and the 'adultery' and 'sexual immorality' of Herod which ended in the 'murder' of John the Baptist, and foreshadowed His own death. It is more likely, however, that Jesus used the Ten Commandments as a guide to these evils, because four out of seven of them come directly from this great statement of God's Law from the Old Testament. Moreover, Jesus had already taught that, 'evil intentions', 'sexual immorality' and 'slander' were all sins that lay behind the breaking of God's laws (see the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5-7).

This might be stretching a point, but as with all the lists in the New Testament, this one surely has significance and purpose (see the writings of Paul; the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, for example, in Galatians 5:19ff and 5:22ff). Jesus' list of evil intentions in verse 19 is undoubtedly a list that he associated with leaders who were 'blind guides' amongst the people of God. We should at least consider whether these seven sins are particularly relevant to leadership within the church. Certainly, all of them can destroy the Church, and its history unfortunately shows this to be true.

Application

Jesus taught what was true, stuck to His guns, and caused offence; and this is not the Jesus we thought we knew from His treatment of others. Jesus was concerned for people's feelings when they were in genuine need (see 14:14 when He had compassion for the crowds), but He was certainly not worried when He faced the evil intent of those who had come to plot His death and find a religious reason to justify their actions. He simply exposed it. Later in Matthew Gospel, Jesus' feelings about the Pharisees overflowed in condemnation (23:13-36), and the dreadful consequences of their teaching was one of the reasons why Jesus felt so deeply about the evil they perpetrated.

Ritual laws about eating food are not a part of our lives today, however, I do suggest that there may be parallels which deserve our examination. As soon as we develop ways of doing things within our churches which nobody ever challenges or which never change, then we are close to developing rituals that people will quickly justify as more important than what the Spirit says. Why are people so deeply attached to pews, organs, projectors, banners, worship styles or anything else that is a tool for worship to the point where if they are not present, then they do not feel that they have worshipped God? If Jesus is not more than the rituals we create, then we have lost the plot! Jesus' teaching in this passage of scripture warns us sharply about developing rituals and practices that are peripheral to our