

Jesus Teaches About Justice

June 17 • Bible Study Guide 3

Bible Background • MATTHEW 15:1–9; MARK 7:1–13
Printed Text • MATTHEW 15:1–9 | Devotional Reading • MARK 7:1–13

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: CONTRAST Jesus' concept of obedience to God with that of the Pharisees; REPENT of offering lip service to God while neglecting to honor God inwardly; and COMMIT to follow God wholeheartedly and not merely conform to outward religious traditions.

In Focus

Dayshawn had grown up in church. He could not remember if he had ever missed a Sunday. He was so active in church that he was in the building at least four to five days a week. If it wasn't Bible study or midweek service, it was choir rehearsal or Sunday night youth service. Besides that, when things were slow at his home church, Dayshawn would travel around to other churches, especially when a famous preacher was in town.

One day Dayshawn's friend Darren came by to ask him to play basketball. Dayshawn told him it was almost time for church and he didn't want to miss it. "Man, you go to church every day. You practically live there," Darren said.

"When the Spirit is moving, it's a privilege. I don't want to take that for granted," Dayshawn replied.

Just then, Dayshawn's neighbor, Deacon White, came by and asked them if they wanted to go volunteer at the soup kitchen. "I can't do it tonight," Dayshawn said. "I got church. The Spirit is moving."

"If that's what the Spirit is moving you do, I don't know what kind of spirit that is. The Spirit is moving me to make a difference," Deacon White said.

Dayshawn thought about what Deacon White said. He always thought that the Holy Spirit was moving when he had goosebumps, not when he actually served others. The next week, both Darren and Dayshawn decided to volunteer at the soup kitchen.

Sometimes our religious tradition can make us blind to God's demands of obedience. Describe a time when you realized you were neglecting to obey one of God's commands.

Keep in Mind

"This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me" (**Matthew 15:8**).

Words You Should Know

A. Scribes (**Matthew 15:1**) *grammateus* (Gk.)—Interpreters and teachers of the Mosaic Law.

B. Hypocrites (v. 7) *hupokrites* (Gk.)— People who are pretentious, pretending to be better than they really are.

Say It Correctly

Esaias. eh-SAI-ahs.

Hypocrite. hi-puh-KRIT.

KJV

Matthew 15:1 Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying,
2 Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.
3 But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?
4 For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death.
5 But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me;
6 And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.
7 Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying,
8 This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me.
9 But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

NLT

Matthew 15:1 Some Pharisees and teachers of religious law now arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. They asked him,
2 “Why do your disciples disobey our age-old tradition? For they ignore our tradition of ceremonial hand washing before they eat.”
3 Jesus replied, “And why do you, by your traditions, violate the direct commandments of God?
4 For instance, God says, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.’
5 But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, ‘Sorry, I can’t help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.’
6 In this way, you say they don’t need to honor their parents. And so you cancel the word of God for the sake of your own tradition.
7 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote,
8 ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.
9 Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.’”

The People, Places, and Times

Pharisees. As one of the largest groups of Jewish religious leaders in the New Testament, the Pharisees transformed the focus of Judaism from sacrifice to law. They accepted the Scripture (our Old Testament) as the authority because they believed the way to God was obedience to the Law. Problems arose, however, because over the years they added hundreds of religious traditions to the Law and then made those traditions as important as the Law. They were fierce opponents of Jesus because He refuted their interpretation of the Law and many of their traditions.

Hypocrite. A Greek word, its original meaning was to give an answer. The meaning later shifted to describe one who is pretentious or believes he is a better person than he really is. The Gospels describe Jesus’ opposition to the religious leaders who acted like hypocrites (see Matthew 6, 15, 22–24; Mark 7; Luke 11–12).

How has hypocritical behavior amongst so-called “Christians” affected our ability to witness and develop positive relationships with those outside the church?

Background

As the first book of the New Testament, Matthew introduced Jesus Christ: “This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham” (**Matthew 1:1, NLT**). Presented as a proclamation of Good News, the Gospel of Matthew establishes Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, and the world’s Savior.

The Gospel of Matthew records the birth of Jesus by Mary, who was a virgin; her subsequent marriage to Joseph; the wise men who came to visit the infant Jesus; and the flight of Joseph and Mary to Egypt after an angel of the Lord warned Joseph to take his family there for protection. The Gospel of Matthew describes the birth of Jesus as fulfilling prophecy: “All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: ‘Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’” (from vv. 22–23, NLT).

Jesus taught His disciples and, through the Word of God, teaches us how to live and then how to share with others the way to become His followers. “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you” (from 28:19–20, NLT).

How can personal beliefs cause us to disagree and argue about the proper interpretation God’s Word?

At-A-Glance

1. The Question (**Matthew 15:1–3**)
2. The Confrontation (vv. 4–6)
3. The Condemnation (vv. 7–9)

In Depth

1. The Question (**Matthew 15:1–3**)

In verses 1 and 2, the scribes and Pharisees questioned Jesus’ authority because His statements and teachings contrasted with their interpretation of the Law. They asked Him why His disciples did not ritually wash their hands prior to eating bread. Jesus did not immediately respond, but instead asked them how they could justify not taking care of their parents, which is a commandment of the Law. He turned their question about something minor into a larger question of faithfulness to the Law.

Why do we have a tendency to focus on trivial matters and traditions versus larger issues of faithfulness?

2. The Confrontation (vv. 4–6)

Jesus further elaborates on His question by pointing out their inconsistency. He confronts them with the Word of God. The commandments say “Honor your father and your mother” and “He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.” What they were doing by not honoring their father was not trivial. They were committing a capital offense according to the Law. Although dishonoring one’s parents was a capital offense, tradition made it acceptable.

The “tradition” to which Jesus referred was called Corban. A person who made a Corban vow was dedicating money to God’s Temple. Unfortunately, some would make a Corban vow and then hold the money and continue to use it as they saw fit. But they could refuse to help their parents, ostensibly because the money was “spoken for.” Jesus pointed out that this was putting tradition above the Law to help one’s parents. In following this tradition, one would be committing injustice against their own flesh and blood.

Have religious traditions superseded the authority of the Word in our churches and personal lives? Why or why not?

3. The Condemnation (vv. 7–9)

Next, Jesus follows up with a condemnation of their actions. He not only condemns them, but He uses the prophet Isaiah for support. The Pharisees are people who “draw nigh” with their mouth and honor “with their lips.” In reality, they are far from God. They teach their own traditions as law and violate the Law of God. This

is a supreme form of idolatry as it uses what is supposed to be good as a way of avoiding obedience to God. Traditions are good, but they are sometimes in opposition of the right thing to do. Many times it's easier to go along with "how we have always done things" than to pursue what is just and right. Jesus holds a mirror up to this hypocritical attitude and shows us that if our traditions obstruct justice and human flourishing, then they are worthless. God is only pleased with our obedience to Him, not man-made rules.

What can we do to ensure we are fulfilling Jesus' commands and not following empty traditions?

Search the Scriptures

1. How were the religious leaders using tradition to excuse breaking God's Law (**Matthew 15:5**)?
2. What does it mean to make "the commandment of God of none effect" (v. 6)?

Discuss the Meaning

Jesus confronted the religious leaders on their traditions. Does today's church have traditions that have a negative impact on pursuing justice for others?

Lesson in Our Society

Many young people are pursuing justice through organizations outside the church. The question then becomes, has the Black church lost its prominence on issues? Are there traditions within our churches that keep us from connecting with young people as well as actually pursuing justice?

Jesus knew that man-made traditions were not as important as obeying God's Word and walking in righteousness. Many things are minor and we as humans have a tendency to make them major. It is our responsibility to examine ourselves and see whether we have let less than important traditions become idols that keep us from pursuing God's heart. Justice for all trumps traditions that benefit a few.

How can we discern between a positive and negative tradition?

Make It Happen

- Review church traditions that might be a hindrance to advocating for justice.
- Examine when the tradition transitioned from being a meaningful remembrance or celebration to an event without meaning.
- Once that transition has been identified, examine steps to redirect the tradition toward loving others and seeking the welfare of the community.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 15:1-9

1 Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, 2 Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread. 3 But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?

The Pharisees in Jerusalem felt that it was their responsibility to see that the Israelites obeyed the Law as they thought it should be done. Generation after generation, the Pharisees and various rabbis had interpreted the Law

with very detailed explanations about how to obey the smallest phrase. In **Exodus 30:18–21**, the priests were commanded to wash before they offered sacrifices to the Lord, but somehow this got magnified to having everyone wash before, during, and after eating. Even the individual washing routines were spelled out differently. The Pharisees took baths after they went to market, because they thought that maybe the dust from a Gentile or some other unclean person or thing might contaminate them. In many religions, people avoid doing or touching some things because they think it will make them impure or even unlucky. To disobey the hand-washing regulations devised by the Pharisees was considered transgressing (Gk. *parabaino*, **pa-ra-BYE-no**), which means “to walk beside or across,” violating a command. In this context, the Pharisees were “walking across” the boundaries established by God.

So the Pharisees sent the equivalent of the religious police to check out this new teacher called Jesus. One of the first things they noticed was that His disciples were not washing their hands with the specific directions passed down by the Pharisees’ traditions. The traditions (Gk. *paradosis*, **pa-RA-do-sees**, “that which is handed down”) had come to have the same weight as the precepts written in the Old Testament.

The word “also” (Gk. *kai*, **KIE**) should not be overlooked here. When Jesus used this word, He was admitting that His disciples were not obeying the hand-washing customs—but He accused the Pharisees of far worse. They were disobeying God’s commandments plainly written in the Scripture. Jesus was really putting the Pharisees on the spot. They thought they were politely (although with their noses in the air) correcting this upstart teacher, but Jesus was boldly accusing them—the moral police of Judaism—of sinning against God’s Law.

4 For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. 5 But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; 6 And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.

The King James Version translates the Greek phrase *thanato teleutato* (**tha-NA-toe te-lew-TAH-to**) as “to die the death,” reversing the order of the words for English readers. This comes from the Hebrew idiom found in the verses Jesus quotes here, “he shall certainly be executed,” which shows the seriousness with which God’s Word treats disrespecting one’s parents (**Exodus 21:17; Leviticus 20:9**). The command to honor one’s parents was the fifth commandment (**Exodus 20:12**), the first with a promise for obedience attached to it (**Ephesians 6:2**). After the commandments were stated, the book of Exodus elaborated upon them with punishments for disobedience: death (**Exodus 21:15, 17**).

Scripture has no record of this ever being carried out, but it does emphasize that God holds obedience and respect within the family as an absolute value. The family is meant to be a picture of the relationship that God desires to have with us—He as our Father and we as His children. Disobedience or disrespect of our Heavenly Father deserves eternal punishment. Perhaps the grandest story of the son who disrespected his father was the prodigal son, but in the end, the father graciously forgave his son, just as our loving heavenly Father desires to forgive our sins and restore the relationship with Him that has been broken by our sin (**Luke 15:11–32**).

The command to honor one’s parents was not meant just for children still living at home with their mother and father, but also extended to adult children as well. Understand that this is not about “obedience” to parents, but “honoring” them—something children should do their entire lives. The Jews clearly understood that grown children were responsible for the financial welfare of the parents who raised them, which is what Jesus was pointing out. The Pharisees had a tradition that allowed adult children to get out of their financial responsibilities to their elderly parents. The Greek word for gift is *doron* (**DO-ron**), referring in this instance specifically to an offering or sacrifice. This was just a tricky bit of semantics, because the one making this oath was not promising to give it to the Temple, but because it was an oath, his wealth was placed out of the reach of his financially needy parents. Thus, he did not have to do anything with his money except keep it for himself. When an adult son or daughter uttered the phrase, “It is a gift,” it was an oath. God’s people are commanded to keep any oaths they make (**Numbers 30:2**). In Mark’s parallel to this Scripture, he uses the word “Corban” instead of “gift” (**Mark 7:1–23**). Corban is the actual Greek word (**kor-BAN**), and referred to a gift designated as an offering for the Lord. In the situation that Jesus was referring to, however, it was not actually given to the Lord. An oath should be kept, but Jesus taught that it is more important to obey the Lord’s direct commands.

7 Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, 8 This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. 9 But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

“Well” conveys the meaning of “honestly” (Gk. *kalos*, **ka-LOCE**), so Jesus was telling the Pharisees that Isaiah was correct in what he said: “Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men” (**Isaiah 29:13**).

The phrase “their heart is far from me” means to hold off from, to deliberately hold oneself far from God. So the picture Isaiah presented is of a hypocritical religion in which people say they are close to God, but inwardly their hearts are far from Him. Instead of teaching people to obey God’s Word, the religious leaders raised their own interpretations above the Law given to their ancestors—and then taught the people to do the same. This is in opposition to the real heart behind God’s Law. God is far more concerned with our relationships with one another and with Him than displays of religious tradition.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Wash Away Your Evil Ways
(Isaiah 1:12–17)

TUESDAY

Let Justice Roll Like Water
(Amos 5:18–24)

WEDNESDAY

Honor Your Father and Mother
(Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16)

THURSDAY

The Spirit Gives Life
(2 Corinthians 3:1–6)

FRIDAY

Call No One Profane or Unclean
(Acts 10:23–33)

SATURDAY

What Defiles Comes from the Heart
(Mark 7:14–23)

SUNDAY

Treat Your Parents Justly
(Matthew 15:1–9)