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THE PROBLEM WITH MAIN STREET USA  
MATTHEW 15

We have a neighbor who is one of those guys who seems to think he knows more than everybody else and thinks he has an answer for everything. Years ago he was dealing with something I can totally relate to. His hair was heading toward extinction. He still had hair, but it was thinning and giving every sign of going the way of the dinosaurs. But of course he had an answer. He had found a medicine that is the solution for this problem and was beginning to apply it. He exhorted me to follow suit. He said my hair could be saved if I would follow in his footsteps.

Honestly, I briefly gave it a thought. I am not at all happy with my personal hair situation. For me, every day is a bad hair day. So, yeah, I was slightly tempted. But there were 2 factors that held me back. First, it was expensive and we didn't have any discretionary income to use on such things. That alone would have been enough to torpedo the idea. But there was a second factor. I was dubious about the efficacy of his solution. IT seemed sketchy at best to me. Despite his urging on more than one occasion and his suggestions that I would soon be envious of him and his bushy hair, I gave it a pass.

As time went by it appeared to me there was zero improvement in his hair. I didn't see his hair getting any thicker. It looked to me like his wonderful drug had accomplished nothing. Evidently he eventually concluded the same thing because he stopped talking about it. He never got his full head of hair. Today he's worse off than me. He's never said a word about that failed project.

As I studied the chapter we're looking at today my neighbor's experience came to mind. Advertising convinced him he had the answer to his problem. But that answer proved to be far less than advertised. As far as I can tell it didn't accomplish anything except relieve him of some money. I fear sometimes our faith appears to be oversold like that. Many people would say that it under delivers. Ray Stedman wrote in his book, *Authentic Christianity*, that there is a version of Christianity that is actually a sham, but it is terribly common today. He wrote that it is "so prevalent and so little condemned that the new Christian can hardly be blamed for adopting it and regarding it as the expected thing...But in reality he is a hypocrite because the peace he claims to have is present only while his circumstances are untroubled, the joy he sings about seldom shows on his face, and the love he is forever extolling is reserved only for those who please him. It is all a

giant sham, although for the most part an unconscious one. He may be a true Christian...but except for rare moments he does not live the Christian life.” He goes on to say it is a life “covered by a thin Christian glaze, a veneer which quickly disappears when events become irritating, difficult or distressing.” Is this faith we claim real? There’s a lot of ersatz stuff out there in the religion world. In Matthew 15 we’ll see some of it show up. We will think about the difference between the overhyped phony and the real thing.

## JESUS IDENTIFIES THE PROBLEM

In the chapters leading up to Matthew 15 there has been an ongoing battle between Jesus and the religious leaders of his people. In the opening segment of this chapter we see another skirmish between them. The religious leaders had Jesus and his followers under a microscope, looking for the tiniest evidence of the bacteria of religious heresy or malpractice. In verses 1-2 they find some. They ask, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”

Well this is obviously a problem. They were failing to *lavase las manos*. Everybody knows you should wash your hands before you eat. Washing hands is basic. Were the disciples uncouth barbarians who didn’t know they ought to wash their hands before they eat? No, that wasn’t the problem. Hygiene was not the issue. Stedman also wrote, “You could have washed your hands with the finest of soaps, and scrubbed like a doctor preparing for surgery, but if you did not do it in a certain way, you were just as unclean ceremonially, as though you had not washed at all.”

There are a number of Old Testament verses that command washing, but they all are about specific situations, like if you touch a dead person or have a skin disease. There is nothing about washing before meals and no commands about the method of washing hands. This was all about a tradition the religious leaders had developed, not about a clear command from the Scriptures.

This was about being ceremonially clean, not about whether you had germs on your hands that might contaminate your food. The tradition of the day was to follow a particular ritual of washing one’s hands. The point was not to make sure your hands were clean before eating, but to perform a rite that supposedly made you clean before God. If you did not perform this rite you were ceremonially unclean, meaning you were not acceptable to God.

Do you remember some of the games we all played when we were kids? There was Red Light, Green Light, Simon Says, and Mother May I? Those last 2 games insisted on particular wording. If the person who was in charge told you, “Simon says, rub your face,” then you were supposed to rub your face. But if they singled you out and said, “Wave your right hand up and down,” and you did it, then you would lose. You were only supposed to obey if they said, “Simon says, wave your right hand up and down.” Mother May I was kind of like that. If they told you to take 2 giant steps forward, you were supposed to respond, “Mother, May I?” If you didn’t, if you just took the 2 steps, then you had to go back to the start. Washing your hands in a particular way was sort of like making sure the leader of the game said, “Simon says.” If you didn’t follow the precise prescribed pattern, you lost. You became unacceptable to God. In this incident the disciples apparently didn’t go through the ritual. The common people typically had trouble with stuff like this. Life was too demanding and hard to continually be going through ritual hand washings the way the religious leaders did.

Jesus was terrific in these little skirmishes. He rarely directly answered questions. He refused to play the Pharisees’ game and be put into their box. He tended to skip the question they asked and go on the offensive in a way that revealed the hypocrisy of their accusations. He does that here. He says, “Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” He claimed they scrupulously followed their own traditions, but did so in a way that allowed them to completely violate God’s Law. This is a much bigger problem than whether they performed some ritual washing.

Jesus didn’t leave that as an unsubstantiated assertion. He gave an example of their disobedience. He pointed out that the Law commanded that people honor their father and mother. It was understood that part of that honoring them was taking care of them especially in their old age. Jesus said the religious leaders found a way to avoid doing that while claiming to keep the Law, because it might have been costly to do what the Law really demanded.

One could declare that some possession or some money was devoted to God. The Law required that one keep vows to God. So if you vowed you would give a particular sum of money to God then that money could be used for no other purpose. For instance, it couldn’t be used to help one’s aged parents. This is appalling, but Jesus said what they were doing was saying the money they had that could be used to help their aged parents had been devoted to God, so, gee, I’m sorry, but I can’t help you Mom and Dad because that money has to go to God.

This was a despicable way of looking holy because they were so devoted to God, but at the same time ducking their God given responsibility to care for their parents. They were really good at meticulously going through the ritual way to wash their hands, but not so good at obeying God. Jesus didn't hold back. He called them what they were. In verse 7 he called them hypocrites, then said Isaiah 29:13 applied to them. "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." In other words, they talk the talk, but they don't walk the walk. They do the things that look religious, but it's all for show.

Our family loves Disneyland even though it is absurdly expensive and most of the time when you go you pay a small fortune for the privilege of being crammed into the park with so many people you can hardly walk. But we have lots of happy memories from there. One of them, for me, begins as soon as you walk into the park. When I walk down Main Street USA I just feel happy. It kind of has a cool feel. It is a scaled down replica of something that mostly doesn't exist these days. You see shops that are modeled after stores that you might have found on the main streets of towns in our country in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They look just right. But none of them are what they look like. The fire station isn't a real fire station. The Emporium is merely a Disney souvenir shop, and so on. They are all facades with no reality behind them. And that's what Jesus said the Pharisees were. They were an elaborate façade, designed to look like the real thing, but inside there's nothing.

You can almost see Jesus' disciples squirming. Everyone in their nation had great respect for the Pharisees, including the disciples. They wanted to follow Jesus but also get along with the most popular leaders in their culture. They hear Jesus calling the Pharisees hypocrites and they just want him to stop. This is uncomfortable for them. So in verse 12 they said, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" Really? I thought they'd be pleased with being called a bunch of hypocrites that cheat their own parents. What did the disciples expect Jesus to say? "Yeah, you're right, I probably shouldn't have said those things. I guess when they criticized you guys I let my anger get the better of me. I need to apologize to the Pharisees. That was uncalled for. My bad."

Jesus was forcing people to make a choice between him and the Pharisees. Even the disciples wanted to follow Jesus, but keep their respect for the Pharisees. But Jesus was making it clear there could be no compromise. It was one or the other. He was instituting a whole new covenant, a new understanding of how to relate to God and how to live. It was a new way that was totally incompatible with the way of the Pharisees. He had said earlier you can't put new wine in old wineskins. To

try to get along with the Pharisees was sticking with the old wineskins. So in verse 14 Jesus put the choice in stark terms. “Leave them, they are blind guides.” If you want to follow Jesus, you’re going to have to leave them. But that’s a good thing since they’re blind and have no idea where they’re going.

Would you go downtown, find a homeless guy pushing his shopping cart that has all his earthly belongings in it and ask him for advice on how to invest your money and prepare for retirement? Would you go to a doughnut shop, find the most overweight guy you see there and ask him for advice on nutrition and exercise? Would you go to Mississippi, find a local person there who has never been outside that state and ask him for advice on the best places in Europe to visit? Jesus said you would be better off doing any of those things than following the teaching and example of the Pharisees.

He explains why in verses 16-20. Notice his statement in verse 20. Referring to things that come from inside of us, things like evil thoughts, murder, adultery, immorality, slander, lies, he says, “These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.” The issue is what defiles a person. What does it mean to defile something? The dictionary says it is “to make foul, dirty or unclean; to pollute or taint.” This is the big issue under discussion in this section of Matthew. What is it that makes a person unclean? What taints us and makes us unacceptable to God?

This is a question that many in our secular society today think utterly irrelevant. It is a question only superstitious, ultra-religious people have any interest in. For most, who cares? They think the obsession with being “clean” before God is trivial at best. But the truth is, it is a fundamental question. What do you do with something that has been defiled?

We have been taking care of Doc and Banjo, Toby and Anna’s two dogs, during the big move to Orange County. Honestly, having them is something of an ordeal. One bad habit they have is if you don’t watch them around meal time they will try to abscond with food from the table. One time we had some biscuits. I turned my back for a moment, and when I turned back I found Doc had managed to get his mouth on a biscuit near the edge of the table. I shouted at him and he let it go, but he had defiled that biscuit. I’m not eating it after it’s had dog slobber on it. That thing is the definition of unclean. Have you seen what dogs do with their mouths? So I didn’t tell Laurie and I gave it to her. Just kidding. That was a defiled biscuit, it was unclean and unacceptable, and therefore worthy of only one thing, being

tossed in the trash. That's what you do with things that are defiled. They are trash, worthy only of being thrown away.

To be defiled and unclean before God is the ultimate rejection. It is to be found in the final court of appeal to have no value and to be worthy only of being tossed onto a trash heap. So let me ask you, how do you like being rejected? We hate it. Rejection cuts to the very core of who we are. It hurts. Ultimate rejection, to be viewed as worthless, to be a piece of trash, is more than we can bear. When we ask what is it that defiles us, this is what is at stake. It is of ultimate importance to every one of us, even if we don't understand that.

The Pharisees tended to do what religion usually does. They focused on outward stuff. You are defiled if you eat the wrong foods, don't wash your hands the right way, or walk too far on the Sabbath. You are defiled if you don't observe the right holy days or offer the right sacrifices. These are the things they were meticulous about and as a result thought of themselves as clean and accepted by God. Jesus' point in all of this is that you can do all those ritual things correctly and scrupulously, and be selfish, unkind, unloving, filled with anger, dishonest and deceitful. Is that really acceptable to God?

Petra Reski is an award winning journalist in Italy who has written a book titled *The Honored Society*. It is an inside look at the lives of some of Italy's most powerful mafia bosses. It is startling that many of them claim faith. Sicilian boss Marcello Fava said that before he killed a person he always prayed and crossed himself. Another don, Bernardo Provenzano, when arrested was found to have 5 Bibles, each of which had underlined passages and hundreds of his hand written comments in the margins. He had 73 statues of Jesus in his house each with the inscription, "Jesus, I put my trust in you." Yeah, I trust in you, Jesus, as we engage in human trafficking, murder, extortion and sell drugs that destroy people's lives. That, to me, is a powerful reminder that it is somehow possible to have all the trappings of religion, but somehow seriously miss the point.

Jesus makes it very clear that what defiles us, what causes us to be unacceptable to God is way deeper than whether we ate some pork or if we observed the right ritual when we washed our hands. It is something in our hearts, something that causes all of the ugliness of the human race. No ritual can ever solve that problem.

## JESUS COMMENDS GREAT FAITH

The second story in this chapter is a rather bizarre one. Jesus goes up into an area in the north of Palestine that is primarily a Gentile region. There he encounters a

remarkable Gentile woman. Her daughter is suffering terribly. She comes to Jesus and says, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me.” She wants him to help her daughter.

The fact that she recognized Jesus as the Son of David is amazing. She knew the prophecies about the Messiah, the Son of David. Apparently she not only believed them, but she believed Jesus fulfilled them. In addition to all of that she believed that Jesus had the power to help her daughter. Perhaps this was in part due to her desperation. No one else could help her poor daughter so this was her only hope. But it is clear that she had faith that Jesus was more than just some itinerant rabbi.

At first Jesus ignores her. That seems odd, but I suspect wherever Jesus went people were clamoring for his attention and asking for his help. He couldn’t help them all, so it’s possible this kind of thing happened more than we are typically aware of. But I also think there was method in Jesus’ approach here. I think he wanted to teach people through her.

The woman kept pleading with him, so finally he said that his mission was not to Gentiles, but to Jews. Still she persisted, saying, “Lord help me.” Then Jesus gives this weird statement: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” Well sheesh, Jesus, could you be a little more offensive? This poor woman is desperate, she loves her daughter and is pleading for help and you call her a dog? Nice. Way to be really loving and caring.

Hold on. Jesus wasn’t being offensive. He was just using an illustration. What kind of dad would take his kids’ food and give it to their pets instead of them, leaving them hungry? Not a good one. That’s all Jesus meant, and this woman understood that. He wasn’t making any comment at all about this woman’s nature or worth. He wasn’t calling her a dog.

The woman responded by saying, “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” That’s totally true. Our little granddaughter Cara, 9 months old, was eating shredded cheese. She got about a third of it into her mouth. Most of it ended up on the floor. It would have been a tedious clean up for us, but the dogs were there. They cleaned it all up efficiently. They ate Cara’s crumbs. Jesus was amazed. The woman jumped right into his illustration and turned it to her use. Her illustration essentially said, “Yes, I know your mission is to the Jewish people, but that doesn’t mean you can’t spare a few crumbs for some of us Gentiles while you are among us.” Jesus granted her request, and in doing so taught his own followers about faith, and about the value of all people.

## JESUS DOES IT AGAIN

The final incident in this chapter is something of a rerun. In the previous chapter we saw Jesus miraculously feed a crowd of 10,000 people. Now a similar situation arises. The crowd isn't quite as large, but still huge, probably in the 8000 range. This time they have a bit more food to start with, 7 pieces of pita bread and a few small fish. Call it 7 fish tacos this time. Still not much for 8000 people. Once again Jesus miraculously fed them and there were baskets of food left over. This time 7 baskets because 7 represented completion. What Jesus provides is perfectly, totally sufficient. The message was the same as in the previous chapter. Jesus has the power to make our tiny bit be enough.

## IMPLICATIONS

### RELIGION ALWAYS MISSES THE POINT

People often talk about the human condition. A big part of the human condition is that it is undeniable that there is something wrong with us. There is lots of debate about the origins of the human race and how long we've been around. What we know for certain is that there is some recorded history that goes back almost 5000 years. That is a long time. And look at us. We are technologically enormously advanced over where we were thousands of years ago. We carry around in our pockets an instrument, a smart phone, that provides us with more power and more information than the most educated and wealthy people had even 100 years ago. We've put people on the moon and send probes to other planets. We can travel halfway around the world in a single day. And yet, we have the same problems people had back in the days of Jesus, and David, and Abraham and before. We still have conflict, war, prejudice, racism, injustice, broken families and violence. We still have a nation full of people medicating themselves with alcohol and drugs to numb the pain of life. We still have people climbing over others to try to find a sense of worth, try to have peace. Why aren't we better? We've improved so much technologically, yet human nature is still just as badly flawed as it was thousands of years ago.

Something has defiled us, and that something is inside of us. It is in our hearts. Religion comes along and tells us we need to fix it. And it tells us that the solution is to be more disciplined, to try harder, to live by its rules, to perform rites and rituals and ceremonies. Look at the Pharisees. Can washing your hands in a particular way ever fix this problem? Can only eating certain foods make us different people? Can making sure we don't lift anything too heavy on the designated holy day enable people to actually love each other, care for each other and live in harmony, unity and peace?



The Pharisees were as good as anyone has ever been at following the rules and performing the rituals. How were they doing with the problem of being tainted inside? They were working hard to figure out a way to kill Jesus. Ideally they would have listened to him, seen his incredible divine wisdom, observed his miraculous divine power, admitted the nobility and goodness of his character and believed in him. But at the very least, even if they somehow could not believe in him, they should have treated him as a creation of God, a fellow member of God's chosen people, and at least left him alone. But they saw him as a threat to their system and their status, and that could not be allowed, so Jesus had to die. They were determined to kill him! That's so wrong, so twisted, and so very human. No ritual can ever fix that.

The Pharisees focused on their traditions, not God's truth. They focused on the trivial, the external, not on the heart where the real problem lies. They sought to look like they were holy, not to be truly holy from the inside out. And this is what religion usually does.

After years of ministry I cringe at what I have seen and heard from Christians. Just recently a Christian brother whom I love and respect said he is wary of doing business with anyone who makes a point of telling him they are Christians. In his experience, pretty consistently the people who have done that have proceeded to do something underhanded or unethical. On multiple occasions I have had to deal with Christian brothers who entered a business arrangement together, who ended up fighting, suing each other, and totally estranged from each other.

The problem seems not to have been fixed. We are still defiled. That is not real holiness. All too often the typical recommendation for us is more discipline. Read the Bible more, pray more, be more accountable, go to church more, give more money. All of those things can be very great, but they can never fix the problem of our hearts being defiled.

Brennan Manning wrote in his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, that our spirituality too often starts with self, not God. "Personal responsibility has replaced personal response. We talk about acquiring virtue as if it were a skill that can be attained, like good handwriting or a well-grooved golf swing...we focus on overcoming our weaknesses, getting rid of our hang-ups, and reaching Christian maturity. We sweat through various spiritual exercises as if they were designed to produce a Christian Charles Atlas. Though lip service is paid to the gospel of grace, many Christians live as if only personal discipline and self-denial will mold the perfect me. The emphasis is on what I do rather than on what God is doing." If we are

honest, Manning says, at some point we will “discover our inability to add even a single inch to our spiritual stature.” What we must understand is that religion, more discipline, more rules, can never remove the problem of being defiled. It never has, and it never will. What is needed is a whole new kind of person.

## JESUS CAME TO TRANSFORM PEOPLE

Jesus came to save us from the real problem of the human condition, the pollution that is inside of us. That’s the thing that really defiles us. Jesus is about fixing that. Ezekiel 36:26 addresses this in the context of a prophecy that God will create a new covenant with people, a new way of us having a relationship with him. He said, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

Jesus came to institute that new covenant. He brought new wine that cannot be put in the old wineskins of religion. It is a covenant that includes a heart transplant. It is about changing us from the inside out so we don’t just look holy, we don’t just act the “right way” and do the rituals, we actually become truly holy and good from the inside out. We get a new heart that beats to be and do what God wants us to be and do. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here.” Christ came to make us new.

What will transformed people be like? In a nutshell they will be like Jesus. But it helps if we flesh that out a bit. They will be humble. In Matthew 11:29 Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” If we are transformed by Jesus we too will be gentle and humble in heart. Years ago I knew a guy that many people saw as a paragon of the Christian faith. He was deeply committed, had rock solid faith, was impressive in his knowledge of the Scripture and theology, was a dedicated family man, had great integrity and morality, was highly successful and a powerful personality. He seemed to be everything a Christian man should be and most people had enormous respect for him. But I experienced one problem with him. He was neither humble nor gentle. He was dominating, intimidating, arrogant and controlling. He was probably as dominating as anyone I have ever met. He was as far from humble as you could get. I did not find rest for my soul around him. In fact, he kind of put me on guard. Here’s the dilemma that presents me. It tells me he may be impressive, powerful, disciplined and devoutly religious, but he doesn’t seem to have been transformed. 1 Peter 5:5 says, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” But this guy *looks so good!* The Pharisees did too. But they weren’t transformed with new hearts. I’m not judging that guy. That’s not my

business. God is the one who has to work in his life. But my point here is transformed people are going to be humble and gentle because that's how Jesus is. If someone has all the trappings of a deeply Christian person but is not humble and gentle with others, there is something wrong with the whole project.

Transformed people are going to be remarkable in that they are not about themselves, but about the glory of God. They aren't insecure and self-conscious because they don't really care about themselves and what others think of them. They care deeply about the Lord Jesus Christ and him being honored. I have been reminded of some things by watching our little granddaughter, Ella. She seems to love all the Disney songs, with *Let It Go* probably being her favorite. When she hears it she gets excited and she sort of sings along. She can't really sing notes very well or even get the words. But with enthusiasm she will sing out "Let it go" rather badly off key. She doesn't care at all. She's not performing. She's not worrying about what people might think. She just has to sing for the joy of it. When a show she wants to watch comes on television she goes into this crazy dance because she's so excited. She does not care at all how she might look or about what people might think. She is simply not self-conscious. What a beautifully free way that is to live. That would be so nice. But a 2 year old is not the pinnacle of a transformed heart. She just reminds us of how free and beautiful it is to be set free from self. The way that happens for us is to be so secure in God's love and so obsessed with his glory that we could care less how we look. That is what happens when we are truly transformed.

A transformed heart loves people in every situation and gives grace as Jesus does. At our Anchorman breakfast a couple of weeks ago I was struck with something John Sisti said. In the course of our discussion he talked about loving others and said if you love, you always do the right thing. Transformed people always love.

Transformed people will always face life with joy and confidence because they know God is at work and will provide what we need. I live with a transformed person. Laurie may not be perfect, although she's pretty close, but she is clearly transformed. And that comes out in her overflowing joy. Recently we had to get our car serviced, so our plan was to drop it off at the auto shop and go out for breakfast. Our plan hit some snags, with the result that we ended up at Denny's for breakfast. She had some fruit as part of her breakfast. There were some pieces of melon, grapes and bananas. She told me I could have some of her fruit. I took a piece of cantaloupe and before I ate it I said, "You know, this fruit is just like us. We are already married so we can't elope." She actually laughed at that. She laughed so hard and so long she could hardly breathe. That's because she has been

transformed and there is peace and joy in her heart. So that's my test of whether you have been transformed. Do you laugh at my jokes?

I don't often quote popes but last year Pope Francis spoke the truth. He said joy is the sign of the true Christian even when enduring suffering and persecution. He cited the example of Jesuit priest Alberto Hurtado from Chile. He worked tirelessly for the poor yet was severely persecuted and suffered terribly. In the midst of the worst of it he was known for praying, "Contento, Senor, contento," which means, "Happy, Lord, happy." The late scholar John Stott said that joy is the distinguishing mark of a Follower of Christ.

These are qualities that no one is going to have by being more disciplined or by working harder or by doing all the right ceremonial acts. They require something happening in a person's heart. So the question is, how can we be transformed? There is no formula for this. It is a work of God. God said, "I will give you a new heart." He will do it. This is not something we manufacture. There is no 5 step program for being transformed. I've seen Christian programs supposedly intended to transform us. Could we just remember this is God's doing?

The biggest element in being transformed is being overwhelmed by God's grace. Our life becomes, as Manning said, a response. In gratitude we respond to God's grace to us joyfully. The more we see how powerful his grace is, how desperately we need it, the more thankful we are for his grace, the more we experience it in our lives as a living reality, the more we will be transformed. The more we live daily in God's unconditional love and are grateful for it, the more we will be transformed.

A second element that is key to being transformed is absolute confidence in God's grace and providence. The more we believe with every part of our being that God gives us what we need at every moment of life, the more we will be transformed.

Finally, we just need to offer ourselves to him to do with what he wants. As we trust in him, ask him to work and ask him to change us into what he wants us to be, he will work in powerful ways. He will give us a new heart.