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March 8, 2026

REAL DEVOTION: MATTHEW 15:1-11, 16-20

Introductory Activity Option 1

Discuss: If you have a mixed-gender or all-female group, you might begin the group time by discussing genuine and knockoff luxury goods. You could ask them to call out some tell-tale signs that a bag or pair of shoes are knockoffs.

Skip the Summarize and Transition below

Introductory activity Option 2

Discuss: Begin the group by asking for group members to share a time when their kids asked for a certain brand of an item (shoes, phone, clothing, headphones, etc.) and instead of getting them the brand they asked for, you purchased something similar but a different brand. How did the child respond?

Summarize and Transition: Sometimes we value certain brands and reject knockoffs, especially in a culture shaped by fashion and influencers. In some cases, the genuine article really does matter—like using the correct battery for a power tool or choosing a manufacturer’s part over an aftermarket one. Today, we’re going to talk about knockoff religion versus the genuine thing. We’ll see that God cares more about the heart than outward appearances. In this lesson, we examine another encounter where the Pharisees challenge Jesus over oral traditions added to God’s law. Jesus confronts them for using those traditions not to prevent sin, but to justify sin against God and others.

1. BROKEN RULES (MATT. 15:1-6)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 15:1-6.

Explain: Let’s begin by remembering who the Pharisees and scribes are. The designation of **Pharisee** means “separatists.” They were obsessed with keeping the law and the oral tradition that had sprung up around the law. We spoke about this a few weeks ago, but it is good to remind ourselves. The oral tradition was put in place by religious leaders to “clarify” God’s law and to build a hedge around the law. These man-made rules were meant to help people stay inside the bounds of the law and not inadvertently sin. The effect of such rules had made it very challenging to “be good.” With such an abundance of extra regulations there were now many ways to “do bad.” It should be remembered that these oral traditions are added to God’s law, and while not keeping them was deemed sinful by some people, that does not mean God viewed such action or inaction as sinful. So that is the Pharisees. Who are the **scribes**?

Originally, scribes were copyists. They created copies of God’s Word and other religious texts. Over time, due to their familiarity with the texts, they were viewed as scholars of and interpreters of God’s Word and God’s law. They were viewed as experts on the law. So, this delegation of hardliners and experts on the law, both God’s law and the traditions, has come from Jerusalem to ask Jesus a question. It’s more than a question, though. It might be that they had come to check out Jesus and His disciples. Through their observation, they have discovered that Jesus and His disciples do not keep all the oral traditions, the man-made rules. In their question about hand washing, they are quietly indicting Jesus and accusing Him, by way of His disciples, of living a less-than-righteous life.

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 14-28* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

Discuss: Later in the passage, we will see that this was not a private conversation. There was a crowd watching and listening. Let's take a moment and stand in the shoes of the crowds watching this encounter. What might they be thinking at this moment?¹ (Allow time for answers.)

Explain: We have to stop and remember that these Pharisees and scribes were seen as the experts and the holiest-of-holy in Jewish culture. We also have to remember that the people only knew what they were taught. They had been taught these traditions and were told by the religious authorities that living in adherence to these traditions was a manifestation of genuine faith. They might have been thinking what the Pharisees voiced, but without the indictment. Remember, these people in Galilee had seen Jesus do good and teach interesting things. But they also observed Him "break" the oral traditions. They might have been wondering if He was really as good as He put on. I think this is one of the reasons Jesus responds as He does.

Direct and ask: Direct the group to look back at the passage and discover how Jesus answers the question.

Explain: The Pharisees asked a question about the disciples' actions. This is, in effect, an indictment of Jesus and His teachings. Jesus hears their question in that spirit. He also understands that by forcing the people to keep man-made rules and passing them off as holy writ, they are harming the people. With that understanding, Jesus responds with a question and indictment of His own. In verse 3, He asks them, "Why do you break God's commandment because of your tradition?" We might have said in our vernacular, "You're one to talk." (Exalting, 201) He is going to give an example of how they break God's law in the next verse, but first, we see that He exalts God's law above their traditions. Placing the Word of God over the word of man is the antidote to their real sin problem (c.f. Exalting 200). Keeping God's law, not man's law, demonstrates the genuine nature of a person's faith.

Application: Let's just stop and be real here for a moment. We can act just like the Pharisees. They were the religious establishment of their day. The religious establishment of today can act just as sinfully. When we place our traditions or our expectations above the Word of God, we are being sinful. You might say I would never do that, but we can be tempted by our flesh and our feelings to judge others who do not hold to our cultural expectations or our personal desires. "We stand on our own soapboxes instead of the timeless truths of Scripture." (Exalting, 202) That is what Jesus is getting at in this passage. He is going to pointedly address their sin: the oral traditions of Israel allowed people to feel ok about breaking God's law. Let's examine Jesus' example.

Notes:

"They were agitated about hands unwashed, and yet laid their foul hands upon God's most holy law." (Spurgeon, 203)

"Jesus teaches us to exalt the authority of God's Word. This is the antidote to accepting man-made authority." (Exalting, 200)

"What is '*tradition*' when compared with the '*commandment*'? What is tradition when it is in conflict with a commandment? What are *elders* in comparison with *GOD*?" (Spurgeon, 202)

"Here Jesus is teaching against the enthronement of tradition and the dethronement of the Word of God." (Preaching, 422)

¹ "The Jerusalem officials apparently asked their question publicly, with the crowds on the periphery." (NAC, 239)
J. Cardinell, 2026

Explain: Jesus asks them to consider the fifth commandment from what we call the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:12). He also asks them to consider a corollary command in Exodus 21:17. If Jesus were to ask these men if they kept that command, they would probably answer in the affirmative. But His words in verses 5 and 6 reveal they do not. A quick explanation is in order. Jesus is referencing a common practice of adult children in His day. In this same encounter recorded in Mark 7, Jesus uses the name for this practice: *corban*. "The *Corban* practice in view was that of pledging money or other material resources to the temple to be paid upon one's death. These funds could therefore not be transferred to anyone else but could still be used for one's own benefit while one was still alive." (NAC, 238) In effect, to shield themselves from caring for ageing parents, as the law would demand, they cry, "corban." It's as if they are saying, Sorry, Mom and Dad, I can't use this money for your benefit because it belongs to God. "To [Jesus] *Corban* killed compassion." (Preaching, 421) They were using the oral tradition to avoid helping their parents. They were being greedy and selfish and using God to justify it.

Summarize Transition: While Jesus uses this example of *corban*, this passage is *not about* caring for parents. It is about placing tradition above the Word of God. Moreover, it demonstrates that when we begin to place tradition above the Word of God, it has the potential to truly harm others.

In the next passage, Jesus is going to help the crowds understand. Remember, they had been listening along, and they were probably a little confused because Jesus was speaking counter to what they had been taught all their lives.

2. LIP SERVICE (MATT. 15:7-11)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 15:7-11.

Explain: In verses 7-8, Jesus continues to speak to the Pharisees and scribes. He describes their spiritual condition and the resulting quality of their false devotion to the Lord. First, He calls them "hypocrites." We still use this word today, but it has roots in ancient Greek culture. "The term hypocrites arose out of the Greek theater and referred to one who acted a part on stage behind a mask." (ETB LG, 30) As is common in cultures, this word took on a broader meaning. People began to use the word to describe someone who pretended to be something they were not. Spiritually speaking, the word could describe someone who professes something about God or about their spiritual lives but does not live in accordance with that declaration. In verse 8, He restates the same idea and attributes the thought to the 8th-century B.C. prophet Isaiah. Jesus says they pay lip service to the Lord. With the fifth commandment and the people's insistence on caring for their wallet instead of their parents still in mind, we can see their hypocrisy play out.

Notes:

Real Devotion: Matthew 15:1-11, 16-20

Here again, Jesus is pointing us beyond outward actions, specifically the words of the holy rollers. He says that while their lips are full of praise for the Lord, their hearts are far from Him.

Discuss: How can believers and those in the church speak in a way that portrays faithfulness to God, but actually act in a way that reveals their hearts are far from Him? Recite it

Explain: The way we treat the down and out speaks to the nearness of our hearts to the Lord. The manner in which we relate to those less versed in “proper church etiquette” reveals our heart posture as well. The mercy and grace we show to others, the words we use about others when speaking quietly with our closest friends, the way we respond to sin and pain present around the world, and the time we are willing to give to help others all reveal the relation of our hearts to the Lord.

Jesus goes on to say that the hypocrites worship the Lord in vain *because* they teach human doctrines as the Word of God.

Discuss: How might a correct understanding of God and His Word affect our worship? (You might go further and ask, how might a correct understanding of God’s holiness or man’s sinfulness or God’s grace or God’s promise of eternal salvation affect our worship?)

One of the challenges we face as Christians is correct worship of the Lord. We worship the Lord in two spheres: our personal worship of the Lord and our corporate worship of the Lord. A correct understanding of God, man, and God’s Word will influence the worthiness of our worship. It will also influence the enthusiasm with which we worship. Jesus says these men in Matthew worship God in vain. Because of their misunderstanding of God’s Word that leads to sinful actions, their “worship” has no purpose. They are not actually worshipping the Lord. They are simply performing actions that *appear to be* worship. To use modern church language, we might say they are “out of fellowship” with the Lord. When one gets the Word of God wrong or places the cultural expectation or man-made rules above the Word of God, they will fall into sin. As we saw with the example of *corban* an excess of religious traditions and cultural expectations held as equal to God’s law will lead to sinful actions. We cannot worship God rightly when we live like that. Next, Jesus is going to turn to the crowds and explain what He means.

Reread Matthew 15:11 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: Here, Jesus returns to the original question asked by the Pharisees and scribes. They had asked why Jesus’ disciples did not wash their hands before eating. Their question was not one of hygiene. Instead, it was about the man-made rules and ceremonial cleanliness. Jesus addresses the question with one line. In effect, He says keeping the oral law does not signify real devotion to God, and not keeping the law doesn’t signify a lack of genuine devotion. Instead, what one does with one’s life matters most.

Notes:

Matthew 15:11
It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth—this defiles a person.

Summarize and Transition: Jesus is going to explain this more in the next passage, so we will hold off on a deeper explanation. Before we move on, though let's consider what just took place. His conversation with the Pharisees and scribes helps us see something very important. Jesus has just called out the religious elite for their disingenuous, knock-off religion. They say they honor the Lord with their mouth. They "worship" the Lord and speak fondly of the Lord. However, the way they live is not in tune with the heart of God. They have twisted God's law as a means of justifying sin. Therefore, their worship of God is pointless. Let us take note, it does not matter how loudly you sing, how much you give to the poor or the church, or how much you do for the church if you are not living rightly, in line with God's Word, your worship and acts of service are in vain.

Let's look at the next passage and see how Jesus explains this further to the disciples. We are going to skip down a bit in the chapter. In the intervening verses (vv. 12-15) it appears the religious leaders have gone away in a huff. The disciples are a bit chagrined at the words and demeanor of Jesus. They ask Him if He realized Pharisees and scribes were offended. Jesus dismisses the concern and declares that the Pharisees and scribes are blind, and they are leading the blind population into a pit. These men are dangerous, and we should pay their feelings no concern. It is more important to teach the people correctly about God's Word than to assuage the feelings of the dangerous leaders. In private, they ask Jesus to explain more fully what He was saying to the Pharisees and the crowds.

3. REAL PROBLEM (MATT. 15:16-20)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 15:16-20.

Explain: Don't miss the radical nature of what Jesus is teaching. In this set of teachings, "Jesus now goes beyond simply challenging the oral law to rescinding the entire category of Old Testament laws concerning ritual purity." (NAC, 239) He laments that the disciples still do not understand, but it's possible they do understand, but are so shocked they need Him to clarify. (c.f. NAC, 241) Jesus begins with an earthly example related to digestion that they would understand (v.17). In verse 18, He provides a spiritual metaphor related to the heart. Now, we might still be a little confused, but Jesus is attempting to "clarify and illustrate the distinction between ceremonial and moral cleanness." (NAC, 241) He is telling them don't look at their hands or any other external metric to determine righteousness. Instead, look to the heart. "How do you know what's in your heart? Easy; just look at what comes out of your mouth." (Preaching, 424) In Luke 6:45, Jesus said, "45 A good person produces good out of the good stored up in his heart. An evil person produces evil out of the evil stored up in his heart, for his mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart."

Discuss: What are some ways that a person's true feelings are exposed through his or her actions?

"Food does not touch the soul: it passes through the body, but it does not enter the affections, or the understanding, and therefore does not defile a man." (Spurgeon, 206)

Explain: Let's look at this from the positive perspective first. A person might present as a gruff individual. We might never think he could be compassionate or caring. But he can be the first one to go to the pastor and say, "I heard about such and such going on with that family. Here, take this money and help them out." Or you might never see them at the funeral hugging the widow, but what you don't see is that He is sitting in vigil and watching over their home while everyone is away. On the negative side of things, you might have someone who appears to be sweet and helpful. But in reality, their private conversations are biting and hurtful. They might smile sweetly when someone shares about a difficult situation in their home and then go on to Sunday School and gossip about the family in the guise of a prayer request. One final example: a person might pray for the poor and give generously to the church, but when they are in the world, they talk about "those people" and turn a blind eye to the needy in their community. They look good on the outside, but they are really just cold-hearted "whitewashed tombs" on the inside.

Read Matthew 23:27-28 (See Notes Box)

But you might be thinking, Jesus is talking about words, not actions. On the contrary, verse 19 in our main passage gives examples of the way the heart "speaks."

Reread Matthew 15:19 (See Notes Box)

We might push aside some of the examples I listed above and say they do not matter, but Jesus says things can escalate quickly. Consider the example we had earlier about *Corban*. The act of actively denying help to one's ageing parents began in the heart that does not honor one's parents. In that example, Jesus focused on the 5th commandment. In this verse, Jesus proceeds through numbers 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. If we harbor ungodly feelings in our hearts and think in an ungodly manner, we will eventually participate in sinful actions.

CONCLUDE

We began the lesson talking about genuine and knockoff products. We can sometimes spot them because the logo is a little off. We also talked about the genuine and aftermarket parts. We can sometimes tell the difference because of the quality and workmanship of those products. When it comes to knock-off faith or "aftermarket" faith, we can spot those, too. Genuine care for others. Genuine words of love. Adherence to God's Word over cultural expressions of "faithfulness" marks a genuine faith. Moreover, any faith that is built on outward appearance and not a heart closely connected to God through a personal relationship with Jesus is not genuine.

Guide and Challenge your group

- Do you need to tone down your cultural expectations of others? Make a point of showing grace when people don't "act right" or act differently than you. Ask the Lord to help you.
- Do you need to realign your heart to the heart of God? Ask the Lord to give you a heart for others and make a point to connect with those who might be different from.
- Lastly, do you need Jesus to help you love like God? Ask the Lord to give you a heart of compassion and mercy.

Notes:

"These scribes and Pharisees were so focused on the externals that they have completely bypassed the internal." (Exalting, 205)

Matthew 23:27-28

²⁷ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and every kind of impurity. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you seem righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Matthew 15:19

¹⁹ For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander.

"Food does not touch the soul: it passes through the body, but it does not enter the affections, or the understanding, and therefore does not defile a man." (Spurgeon, 206)