

## AN EXPLORATION OF MATTHEW 15:1-20

## Preaching Texts Explored

Bob Reid, Scholar-in-Residence

II PHARISEES CONFRONT JESUS ABOUT UNCLEanness		Matt. 15:1-9
{1}	A Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,	
{2}	"Why do your disciples break the <b>tradition of the elders</b> ? For they do not wash their hands before they eat."	HUMAN TRADITIONS
{3}	B He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God <b>for the sake of your tradition</b> ?"	COMMAND OF GOD
{4}	C For God said, ' <b>Honor</b> your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of <b>father or mother</b> must surely die.' "HONOR"	GOD'S COMMAND
{5}	C' But you say that whoever tells <b>father or mother</b> , 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not <b>honor</b> the father.	HUMAN PRECEPT IS THIS HONOR?
{6}	B' So, <b>for the sake of your tradition</b> , you make void the word of God.	WORD OF GOD
{7}	A' You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:	
{8}	"This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;	
{9}	in vain do they worship me, teaching <b>human precepts</b> as doctrines." HUMAN PRECEPTS	
II' DISCIPLES ARE CONFUSED ABOUT UNCLEanness		Matt. 15:10-20
{10}	A Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand:	LISTEN & UNDERSTAND
{11}	B it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."	PRONOUNCEMENT
{12}	C Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"	PHARISEES OFFENDED
{13}	C' He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone;PHARISEES DECLARED	
{14}	they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."	"BLIND GUIDES"
{15}	B' But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us."	PARABLE
{16}	A' Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding?"	LISTEN & UNDERSTAND
{17}	A 1 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth 2 enters the stomach, 3 and goes out into the sewer?	INTO MOUTH INTO STOMACH BECOMES EXCREMENT
{18}	1' But what comes out of the mouth 2' proceeds from the heart, 3' and this is <b>what defiles</b> .	OUT OF MOUTH FROM THE HEART REAL EXCREMENT
{19}	B For out of the heart come evil intentions, B' murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.	EVIL INTENTIONS EVIL INTENTIONS
{20}	A' These are <b>what defile</b> a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."	WHAT DEFILES

## I EXPLORING THE TEXT IN CONTEXT

- A. Note how Matthew depends on the Gospel of Mark for this unit of tradition.  
See Mark 6:53-7:30
  1. The primary Matthean addition is the statement in 15:12-14
  2. The remaining material is an edited version of Mark's version of the story
- B. The Context: Matthew 14:34-15:28
  - I JEWISH CROWDS HEALED BY JESUS Matt 14:34-36
  - II PHARISEES CONFRONT JESUS ABOUT UNCLEanness Matt. 15:1-9
  - II' DISCIPLES ARE CONFUSED ABOUT UNCLEanness Matt. 15:10-20
  - I' A GENTILE WOMAN'S DAUGHTER HEALED BY JESUS Matt. 15:21-28

"The stories of Jesus' confronting Jewish particularism and his own disciple's confusion need to be read in light of the framing stories of people who exercise faith. Note especially that the Gentile woman exercises faith beyond that of the Jewish crowds who bring people to be touched in order to effect a healing. The Gentile woman is depicted as assuming Jesus can heal without being physically present. This idea would not be lost on the post-resurrection community who also trusted that Jesus could continue to heal even if he is no longer able to be physically present. And it is this contrast between Jewish and Gentile expressions of faith in Sections I and I' that reveals the essential contrast in Mark's fictive argument concerning the Gentile Mission at the heart of the Ninth Narrative Complex." (From Bob Reid, *Preaching Mark*)

## II WHAT IS THE TROUBLE IN THE TEXT? GROUP DISCUSSION

- A. What is the problem in vvs 1-9?
  1. Technical concepts:
    - a. Tradition of the Elders: "The tradition of the elders, rejected by the Sadducees but highly esteemed by the Pharisees, was made up of legal comments or case decisions by rabbis past and present. The prescribed washing of hands did not have to do with physical hygiene so much as with ceremonial purity. Cf. Exodus 30:17-21; Deut. 21:6 1QS 5:13-14)"
    - b. Corbon: This is similar, in part, to the contemporary idea of estate planning in which an individual donates their assets to a non-profit charity who provides the individual with a guaranteed income until their death. But, in this case, the individual was willing all of their assets to the Temple and, as such, could not by law use the capital to provide for their parents. A dodge of social responsibility permitted by the temple because it became the financial beneficiary. Cf. Television Ministries that claim tax law as superior when challenged concerning financial appeals to and donations made by the elderly.
  2. What is the issue at stake as far as Jesus is concerned in vvs. 1-9?

- B. What is the problem in vvs. 10-20
1. Why do you suppose the Disciples are having such a hard time understanding? E.g., why does Peter assume what Jesus said was a “parable?” Was it.
  2. What pronouncement does the word “parable” in vs. 15 refer to? Why?
  3. In spite of the circumlocutions of our translations, Matthew’s Jesus could not be more blunt in his analysis of Judaism’s religious teachings. References to digestive organs and sewer systems in the present narrative obscure the forcefulness of Jesus’ explanation.
    - a. We might paraphrase, ‘It is not what you eat and defecate that makes you unclean. No, it is the evil actions and vices excreted from your hearts that defile.’
    - b. And even here I am supplying once-removed, clinical language that may obscure the bluntness of Jesus’ words. The point is, however crude or descriptively euphemistic Jesus words may have been, Matthew tells the story in a way that his first century readers could hardly keep from supplying the shocking language themselves.
    - c. For Jesus to have described the most sacred teachings of a religion in this manner would certainly justify a far more vitriolic response. Such a vulgar way to summarize and dismiss the totality of Jewish sacred observance would have been unforgivable for any who heard it.
      - d. *Why do you suppose Jesus spoke in such shocking language?*
- C. What do you notice about the list of evil intentions, especially as it relates to the sin of Corbon? (Ex.20:12-17)
- D. In the primary story of this narrative complex, Jesus indicts the religious leadership for having transformed the morality of God into the legality of Tradition and then uses a pointed lesson differentiating the biology of the digestive system from the metaphysics of the human heart to demonstrate the contradiction of the human tradition

### III IS THERE A SIMILAR *TROUBLE* IN THE WORLD TODAY?

- A. Vvs. 1-9: Do we (or others) have a similar trouble/problem\* today like this one which Jesus confronted the Pharisees. (\*Letting our religious traditions usurp the requirements of God’s love expressed in our social commitments) Name some?
1. Jesus seems to suggest that something fundamental is at stake in the way we let our traditions usurp the requirements of God.
  2. What is really at stake?
- B. Do we have a similar trouble/difficulty in **listening and understanding**? Looking at the time and energy we spend on matters in our congregations are we more concerned with:
- a. acceptance and maintenance of our own “tradition of the elders” or
  - b. challenging evil intentions spoken as authoritative that destroy and cripple lives of people around us (vvs. 19-20).

### IV WHERE IS GRACE EXPERIENCED IN THIS STORY?

- A. Clearly some of Jesus’ word’s are Word of indictment. But others are Word of grace? Where is the grace in the story for the people in the story.
1. **KEY:** Clearly some form of Jewish particularism was still a formative factor in the church to which Matthew tells the Jesus story. Long after the first Christian Pentecost, issues of Jewish particularism— concerning what one could and could not eat, do, or have association with— plagued the early church at Jerusalem as witnessed in the story recounted by Paul in Galatians 2:11-16.
  2. It was representatives of the Jerusalem Church who came down to Antioch to oppose Peter’s custom of eating with Gentiles (Cf. Mk. 3:22-30).
  3. Paul confronted Peter when he withdrew from the “defiling behavior” by charging, “‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’” (Gal. 2:14).
  4. Paul labels this activity as not “acting consistently with the truth of the gospel.”
  5. Yet, pressure from the Jerusalem church was such that Peter did withdraw from the practice of eating with the Gentiles, effectively labeling them as second-class Christians (Bruce, *New Testament History*, 283-285).
  6. By drawing on this example in the letter to the Galatians, Paul makes it obvious that the matter of Jewish particularism in the church was still as pressing a problem as was when he first confronted Peter with the hypocrisy years earlier.
- B. How is Matthew using this story in it’s larger theological context to speak a Word of Grace to Christians struggling in the last quarter of the first century AD?

### V. HOW IS THAT SAME GRACE AVAILABLE IN THE WORLD FOR US AT THIS TIME?

- A. How does the addition of the Matthean vss 13-14 shift or effect the application of grace that you think Matthew was suggesting be applied in his day and what difference does that make to our actions today
- B. This is an invitation to you, the class participant, to suggest ways in which you see similar possibilities of grace in the word today. (Be aware that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John used the Jesus story to preach the possibilities of grace available for their own congregations. Are the possibilities of grace that you see available today part of the trajectory of grace you see being “preached” through this story to the first Matthean community Christians who heard it.)