

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 43”**  
*Matthew 15:1-20*

It's infuriating, this journey through Matthew's Gospel, isn't it? We've just had two lovely stories about Jesus – the feeding of the 5,000 and the walking on the water episode. They've told us a bit about Jesus' life and his power and all that kind of thing and, as they're stories, we can apply a bit of interpretation, have a look at their meaning, and draw some nice conclusions from them. Even if we struggle to believe they're actually true accounts, we can see the moral of the story, as it were. There's all that stuff about sharing and Jesus providing for our needs in the loaves and fishes story. And, as we saw last week, Jesus is with us in the storms of life, helping us through our crises. All very encouraging stuff, nice and cosy – warm'n'fuzzy religion.

Then we turn the page and we're confronted with this stuff. Jesus teaching very directly. No ifs and buts and maybes, but laying it down good and proper about what he expects from those who claim to follow him. This isn't a message with the kind of nice moral you could get away with in a primary school assembly. This is straight talking that leaves no room for wriggling out of it, no possibility of missing the point or re-interpreting it in a way that softens its very clear message. You can't avoid responding to this kind of teaching. It might work you up into a lather of self-righteous indignation (as it may well have done to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who were the objects of Jesus' outspoken comments) or it might drive you to your knees in recognition of your need to do something about this in your own life.

As we have already seen in this Gospel of Matthew, the proclamation by Jesus of the values of God's Kingdom, the Kingly rule of God through his appointed and anointed Messiah, by words and in action, brings him up against those who seem to have most to gain by sticking to the old way of doing things. Usually they are the Pharisees, the guardians of the tradition of the Jewish people, men who want to retain their status and position as the ones who know what needs to be done. If you can convince people that things have to be done in a certain way, and you are the only ones who know what that way is, you have a hold over the people that will always enable you to feed your appetite for power (cf. Terry Pratchett's *Small Gods*). In the episode we've just read, these Pharisees and other professional lawyers make the trip up from Jerusalem – then as now the seat of their power, so this is the “heavy mob” – to check out Jesus and his growing band of supporters. And in this story we have a restatement by Jesus of what this new Kingdom has at its heart. He's already touched on some of this stuff in his Sermon On The Mount.

The Pharisees fire the opening shot with their insistence (in v2) on “*the tradition of the elders*”. The context here is that of washing of the hands before eating – something that they've heard Jesus' disciples are not doing. Jesus then makes a comparison between “*the commands of God*” and “*the traditions of men*”, calls them “*hypocrites*” (never really calculated to endear himself to them) and sets out what this

is really all about. Paradoxically, the values of this kingdom go back further than their traditions – he goes back to God, but they have based their values on the layers of tradition built up by human beings over the centuries.

As we've said, the context here is that of washing hands, but it's nothing to do with hygiene: it's all to do with ritual. The idea was that they cleansed themselves of anything that was impure, unholy, non-kosher before they put their hands anywhere near their mouths. When they'd been to the market, for example, there was the possibility that they could have touched something that was ritually unclean. They might have handled money that had been touched by a Gentile or brushed against something that had some kind of ritual uncleanness about it. If they didn't wash their hands, that impurity could find its way into their body and they'd end up defiled and unable to have anything to do with God.

There were so many of these things that were part of a tradition that had grown up over the centuries. The Mishnah – a kind of commentary on the Hebrew scriptures, a handbook to good practice of the Law – had an entire section devoted to cleanliness. It was important for these people. And it was very prescriptive. Nothing was left to chance or to individual interpretation. If you've seen those little posters that sometimes appear by the hand basin in a hospital with diagrams of how you ought to wash your hands, well, that's nothing compared with this. One long section – or “tractate” – deals with the amount of water to be used, including such gems as this: *“If a man poured water over the one hand with a single rinsing, his hand is clean; but if over both hands with a single rinsing, Rabbi Meir declares them unclean unless he pours over them a quarter-log or more.”* (A “log” is a measure of volume.) They didn't want to run the risk of falling out of favour with God. But Jesus says that these traditions are not the point of the Scriptures. Look at God's word, he says, and think about that rather than about the hundreds of rules and regulations that are supposed to bring you nearer to God, but actually take your attention away from him.

He quotes to the Pharisees themselves the example of people who try to get out of the obligation to care for their parents – a straightforward reading of the fifth commandment – by making a vow that all their property and wealth is devoted to God (and cannot therefore be used for anyone else). In v6 he actually says that they are using their tradition to override God's clear word to them: their own agenda is a means of manipulating God's.

He then expands a little on it to the crowd which has now gathered – and then has to explain further for the sake of his disciples when they go off into one of the houses. That's obviously the nub of his message here in this story. What he is saying is that you cannot be contaminated by what goes into you. In other words, anything that you take into your body because you haven't washed your hands is going to go into

your stomach and eventually find its way out of the body (the Greek actually says, “*is shot out into the toilet*”) without doing any long-term spiritual harm. The problem with the human condition, though, is what is already in there, in the heart. And it’s when that starts to find its way out of the body – through our words and actions – that you can see the damage being done.

What is it that defiles a person? he asks. Is it failing to stick to a tradition? Or is it harbouring attitudes that are at odds with God’s word? Clearly, it’s the latter. Look, he says, there are all these things that come out of a person’s heart, that have their root in your attitudes – evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder and the like. Don’t waste time on the peripherals, on the nit-picking, holier-than-thou traditions that have taken you so far away from God’s word. Get working on the things in that list: your attitudes, on the things that are deep within the flawed hearts of men and women, and which burst out because we have not been directing our efforts into the right places.

It’s not a problem that was confined to the Pharisees and their soul mates – and it’s certainly nothing new. Jesus quotes some lines from the prophecy of Isaiah (vv8,9). In the time of the prophet there were many people who seemed to do and say all the right religious things, who turned up at the place of worship at the right time, who offered all the right sacrifices, who said all the right words when called upon. But their attitudes were far from conforming to the kind of thing God wanted. Look at what he says to them in *Isaiah 58* about their tradition of fasting:

*‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,  
‘and you have not seen it?  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?’  
Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please  
and exploit all your workers.  
Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.  
You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.  
Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for people to humble themselves?  
Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed  
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?  
Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?*

Or listen to what Isaiah’s predecessor had to say in *Amos 8:4ff*.

*Hear this, you who trample the needy  
and do away with the poor of the land, saying,  
“When will the New Moon be over  
that we may sell grain,  
and the Sabbath be ended  
that we may market wheat?”—  
skimping on the measure,*

*boosting the price  
and cheating with dishonest scales,  
buying the poor with silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
selling even the sweepings with the wheat.*

Those words are addressed to people who did all the right things according to the tradition, their take on what following God was all about, but who fell a long way short when it came to God's word, the values of the Kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim.

Oh, how smug we can feel when we look at these Pharisees! Isn't it so easy to see where they're going wrong? And how superior we are to the people of Amos' and Isaiah's day! But the problem is no different today. You don't have to look too far to see the ways in which we have allowed tradition to usurp the place of God's word in our lives and in our church. Whether it's women and hats, or the times of services, or the things that we should be eating and drinking as Christians, or the kinds of music we allow in worship, or the words we use in our prayers – we have our own traditions. We like to do it all right on Sunday and make sure we're seen to be making the right moves, heard to be making the right noises. And it's not too long before that sense of tradition, "doing the right thing", obscures our desire to hear what God is saying to us. We become so preoccupied with the things that *we* think matter, that we lose sight of the things God says matter.

I suppose it's a part of the human condition, really. If we make the rules, we feel we are holding on to the power. If someone else makes them – even if that someone else is God – then we don't feel so much in charge. Jesus had no time for such things, and he forcefully made his point when he called these Pharisees "*hypocrites*". How that must have hurt! Because it does hurt us, doesn't it? Call me anything you like, except a hypocrite. People particularly like to say that church is full of hypocrites – and for many, that's why they don't come. (When people say that to me, I tell them that we've always got room for one more, so they shouldn't let that stop them!) But that is the name Jesus uses here for those who have laid a veneer of religiosity over a life full of untransformed attitudes. He's pretty straight about it and there's not really a great deal to explain here (it's difficult for preachers when the message is already so direct). We're just left with a question ringing in our ears – have you "*broken the command of God for the sake of your [human] traditions*"? In other words, are you a hypocrite? That's what it boils down to. Are you so intent on making the right moves and the right noises that you've actually forgotten what God wants you to do? Do you spend more time arranging meetings to discuss God's work than actually doing God's work? Do you spend so much time at meetings about God's word that you don't have time to read God's word? Do you polish up your veneer of religiosity on Sundays so that it's so thin by Monday that your real attitudes start to show through ?

William Barclay (again) writes that, “*If religion consists in external regulations and observances it is two things. It is far too easy ... [and] it is quite misleading*”. It’s easy because if all we have to do is keep to a set of prescriptive rules, with no room for manoeuvre and no need to think, we can just do that “Christianity by numbers” stuff. It’s far easier to abstain from certain foods or keep to a routine of washing your hands, than it is to love the unlovely and unlovable and to help the poor and needy at the expense of your own time and resources. And it’s misleading because it can make you seem squeaky clean on the outside, while your heart and mind are full of resentment or lust or anger.

You see, Jesus’ agenda is one of integrity and authenticity. That’s what this Kingdom is all about. Those are the values that he, as the Kingly Messiah, models in his own life. Those are the things that took him to the cross for you and for me. Those are the things that his Father – time and time again – tried to communicate to humanity through the words of the prophets and preachers and poets of the Old Testament. Those are the things that will make us stand out in a world that so often seems driven by deceit and secrecy and selfishness. “*What matters to God is not so much **how** we act, but **why** we act; not so much what we **actually do**, but what we **wish in our heart of hearts to do**.*” (William Barclay) All that outward religiosity cuts no ice with the world around – nor with God.

Jesus calls his followers to a life that is lived for him through and through, not just in here on Sunday, but wherever you are from Monday to Saturday – out there on your own frontline. There’s no point claiming to follow the values of the Kingdom, if yours are always showing through. Jesus called these Pharisees hypocrites. What would he call you?

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What is it that defiles a person? he asks. Is it failing to stick to a tradition? Or is it harbouring attitudes that are at odds with God's word? Clearly, it's the latter. Look, he says, there are all these things that come out of a person's heart, that have their root in his attitudes (look at *vv18-20*). Don't waste time on the peripherals, on the traditions that have taken you so far away from God's word. Jesus quotes some lines from the prophecy of Isaiah (*vv8,9*). And look at what God says in *Isaiah 58* and *Amos 8:4ff*.

Jesus' agenda is one of integrity and authenticity. That's what this Kingdom is all about. "*What matters to God is not so much **how** we act, but **why** we act; not so much what we **actually do**, but what we **wish in our heart of hearts to do**.*" (William Barclay) There's no point claiming to follow the values of the Kingdom, if yours are always showing through.

### Questions for discussion

1. How would you describe the agenda Jesus came to announce?
2. List some of the "*traditions of men*" that we hold on to today. How have they come about? What use are they?
3. Is **all** tradition wrong? Why/why not?
4. What are the main barriers to our living a life of integrity? What can we do about it?
5. Why don't we like to be called hypocrites?
6. What is the main thing you have learned from this passage? What are you going to do about it?