

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 15 (PART 1)

Matthew 15:1-9 - Handwashing

Earlier in our study of Matthew, we discussed “fence laws” - the traditions that the religious leaders had set up to ensure that they kept the actual commandments of God. Here is what we discussed:

Over time, the rabbis developed what would be known as “fence laws”, commands that would help a person not even get close to breaking the actual command of God. Many of these laws were collected in the “Mishnah” which is a collection of the most renowned rabbi’s traditions and interpretations.

Here’s an example of a fence law. If the law says “don’t step in that hole”, if you construct a fence 10 feet away from the hole, and put a sign up that says “don’t go near the fence” - this ensures you won’t go near the hole. This can be a good thing. However, over time the Pharisees elevated the fence law to the same place as the *actual* law from God and so someone would be rebuked and condemned, not for stepping in the hole, but by stepping near the fence!

In this instance, Jesus is battling with the Pharisees and scribes over hand washing. This wasn’t about physical cleanliness and germs like we think of today—it was about *ritual purity*. This ritual was not commanded in the Law of Moses but was based upon a command that was specifically directed to the priests working in the tabernacle/temple.

Exodus 30:17-21 - The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 18 "You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base of bronze, for washing; and you shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it. 19 "Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet from it; 20 when they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water, so that they will not die; or when they approach the altar to minister, by offering up in smoke a fire sacrifice to the LORD. 21 "So they shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they will not die; and it shall be a perpetual statute for them, for Aaron and his descendants throughout their generations."

The idea was that one might become ritually defiled during the day (by touching Gentiles, impure objects, etc.), and washing hands was a symbolic act to restore cleanliness before eating sacred meals—even ordinary food. Over time, this priestly regulation was expanded by religious leaders to apply to *everyone* in daily life, especially around meals.

The rabbinical teachings were eventually part of the collection of the oral traditions (the Mishnah). There is an entire section about handwashing called “Yadayim” (hands) which described how much water should be used, the kind of vessel that should be used to hold the water, the kind of water, what to do if the vessel that holds the water gets contaminated, how the

water should be poured over the hands (including the provision that a monkey could do it. although some rabbis disagreed)...and so on¹.

In these verses from Matthew, Jesus will also mention a tradition that was practiced which prioritized giving money to “God” (temple?) while neglecting care for one's parents. The key to this entire section is found in 15:3 - “why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” and in the rebuking quote from Isaiah 29:13 which he gives in vs 8-9.

Q - What does this quote from Isaiah mean and how could this be relevant to our lives today?

Matthew 15:10-11 - Jesus’ View On Defilement

Q - What does this mean?

Jesus says that it is what comes from the heart that defiles someone, not what they eat. He is not invalidating the commands of the Old Covenant, but he is reordering and reprioritizing.

Matthew 15:12-20 - Jesus Elaborates

Jesus explains that true defilement isn’t about external rituals like handwashing or dietary laws but about the condition of the heart. When the disciples express concern that His teaching offended the Pharisees, Jesus makes it clear that their leadership isn’t rooted in God—they’re blind guides leading others into ruin. As Jesus answers the questions/criticism that arise from this incident, he elaborates on his view of defilement & the priority of the cleansing of the heart.

Q - What are examples of things we might do today that “look holy” but come from a heart that’s far from God?

Your relationship with other people is related to your relationship with God. The Pharisees seemed to have missed this.

The practices of the scribes and Pharisees might seem ridiculous to us, but we are not immune from this same spiritual sickness. True worship is about the heart, not just habits. It is easy for the Christian to slip into religious efforts that are in vain because they are disconnected from the heart. It’s always important for us to have a “heart check” where we ask (or are asked) if there is congruence between our outward actions and deeds and the condition on what is inside. What we do and say does matter - but it’s not the most important thing.

This can be tricky because others can see the outside and it's tempting to think we’re “good” if other people think we’re good. It’s tempting to do things which will get recognized by others. Yet, evidence of a good heart is wanting to be pleasing to God even in unseen things and places. We are called to start at the heart and live lives and speak words that flow from the innermost part of us which has God on the throne.

¹ source - sefaria.org/English_Explanation_of_Mishnah_Yadayim.1.1