

International Bible Lessons Commentary
Matthew 15:1-20

International Bible Lessons
Sunday, May 18, 2014

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The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, May 18, 2014**, is from **Matthew 15:1-20**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary* below. **Study Hints for Thinking Further**, a study guide for teachers, discusses the questions below to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion; these hints are available on the **International Bible Lessons Commentary** website. The weekly *International Bible Lesson* is usually posted each Saturday before the lesson is scheduled to be taught.

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Matthew 15:1-20

(Matthew 15:1) Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,

Reports about Jesus' teaching and healing in Galilee began to concern the most influential political and religious leaders in Jerusalem; including King Herod, who

imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist, and the Pharisees and scribes, who considered themselves enforcers of and experts in the laws and traditions of Israel. A representative group of these religious leaders left Jerusalem to examine Jesus (and they would later condemn Jesus to death).

(Matthew 15:2) “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.”

Rather than direct their attention to the Law of God (the Law of God in the first five books of the Bible) or the Old Testament prophets, these leaders focused on the fact that some of their human traditions (their selfish interpretations of the Law of God by former religious leaders) were not being followed by Jesus’ disciples and by implication Jesus was responsible for their misbehavior. They saw themselves as the recognized and duly appointed religious leaders and teachers, not Jesus.

(Matthew 15:3) He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?”

In response, Jesus asked them why they set their traditions (their accepted practices and rules), above the Law the God and used their interpretations of God’s Law and their traditions to violate the Law of God. Through their traditions, they changed the correct interpretation and application of God’s Law in order to achieve their own

selfish purposes. As the Son of God and Messiah, Jesus interpreted the Law correctly and told His accusers the truth about God and God's Law; He pointed out to them their immoral thoughts that led to their immoral behaviors (which offended them).

(Matthew 15:4) For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.'

Jesus specifically accused them of using their selfish traditions to break the Ten Commandments and avoid the Bible's explanations or applications of God's Law. Thus, Jesus affirmed the authority of the Scriptures and the Bible's interpretations of the Law of God. Moses revealed the Ten Commandments in the Law of God; which included the commandment to honor your parents: "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). In the next chapter of Exodus, God inspired Moses to give some examples of ways some people dishonor their parents and the penalty for doing so: "Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death" (Exodus 21:15). "Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death" (Exodus 21:17).

(Matthew 15:5) But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father.

Jesus revealed that honoring your parents involves more than refusing to do evil things to them (see Exodus 21:15, 17). Honoring your parents involves doing positive good to them, which includes helping them in their old age. The Pharisees and scribes interpreted the Law of God in a way to avoid helping their parents and in a way that would generate additional income for the priests and themselves from those who wanted to selfishly keep as much of their money as they could by not taking positive actions to help their parents. Their gifts to the temple would have been less than the cost of helping their parents. By not cursing or striking their parents and by giving gifts to God, they thought they were obeying God's law; Jesus said that true obedience involved true loving actions toward God and parents.

(Matthew 15:6) So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.

To make a law void is to refuse to enforce a law or to remove a penalty from the law that the lawgiver intended and enforcement of the law requires; to make a law void includes changing the interpretation or meaning of a law by adding to it or subtracting from it. The Pharisees and scribes made the word of God void by adding to it and subtracting from it, and by making their interpretations of the word of God equal to or the only recognized authoritative interpretations of the word of God. They interpreted the word of God in ways that God never intended and refused to do the loving actions that the word of God commanded.

(Matthew 15:7) You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

Jesus called them hypocrites because they pretended to be what they were not; they pretended to honor God, when actually they did not honor God by the way they made the word of God void and by the ways they mistreated their parents by avoiding their duty (among other things). Because many of the Israelites (and especially these religious leaders) loved money, they created traditions that fit their selfish desires and taught them as God-honoring interpretations that everyone must follow. Some of their traditions were motivated by their selfishness and revealed how people cannot love God and also love money: Jesus taught, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24). These religious leaders actually loved money and did not love God, and their traditions appealed to selfish and self-centered people, which made them and some of their traditions popular with selfish people.

(Matthew 15:8) ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;

God foretold through Isaiah that many who performed religious rituals actually did not do so because they loved God and wanted to honor God, praise God, worship God, and draw others into a right and loving relationship with

God according to the Scriptures. Their lips professed that they loved and obeyed God, but their actions showed the true state of their hearts or desires: their hearts were far from God, and they had no real desire to obey God as God intended because they did not love God or the word of God.

(Matthew 15:9) in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

Vain worship is empty worship; vain worship has no value in the eyes of God and has no benefit to the worshiper. Vain worship does not flow from love for God or obey the word of God from love for God and others. Vain worship has no desire to honor God, but worships God or “attends worship services” for possible personal benefits from God and others. Teaching manmade laws or rules or mere human conceptions of God that are not true and according to the Scriptures are vain or empty and have no value for drawing someone into a relationship that honors God or helps others love, honor, and obey God. Some teach manmade ideas as though they were revelations from God and these are vain or have no value (they may often be the creations of human pride and vanity).

(Matthew 15:10) Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand:

After Jesus tried to reach the conscience and understanding of these religious leaders and lead them to repent by showing them their errors according to the

Scriptures, Jesus turned to the crowd so they would understand Isaiah and the Scriptures and not be misled by the false human traditions of these leaders. He answered the questions of these leaders so the crowd could hear because these leaders had questioned Him in the hearing of the crowd.

(Matthew 15:11) it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”

Jesus wanted the people to learn that what happens internally in the heart and mind of a person is more important than the food they eat; too often, what we believe inside comes out in words and actions that dishonor God, others and ourselves; thus, defiling us. The Pharisees defiled themselves when they hypocritically created human teachings and traditions that set aside and violated the law of God and the right interpretation of the word of God. Eating with unwashed hands would not defile a person morally or spiritually, but whatever a hypocrite did as he pretended to honor God would defile him.

(Matthew 15:12) Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?”

The Pharisees so demonstrated their displeasure at what Jesus had said that they visibly and probably verbally expressed that Jesus had insulted them. They

demonstrated that they would not repent for what they had been doing and teaching. They probably began to warn the disciples about Jesus and accuse the disciples of disobeying the law of God in spite of what Jesus had just taught them about the true meaning of the Law of God. The disciples were so concerned that they reported the Pharisees response to Jesus.

(Matthew 15:13) He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.

Regarding religious leaders and others, Jesus taught a general truth or principle about their relationship with God the Father, His heavenly Father. The true God has not planted or called to lead and teach every person who claims to be a servant from or leader and teacher from God. True religious leaders will be nourished by God’s Spirit and Word because they will prayerfully study and prepare themselves to teach the word of God accurately and truly and by their obedient example. False religious teachers and leaders will be removed by God at some point in the future (and this can be a matter of prayer for all of God’s people). False religious teachers can be recognized in part because they will act and teach in ways similar to these Pharisees and scribes who questioned Jesus and refused to do the will of God. They will take offense at Jesus and the teachings of the Bible. They will add to or substitute their teachings and traditions for the word of God.

(Matthew 15:14) Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.”

Knowing that these religious leaders, who took offense at Jesus and His teaching, might tempt His disciples to do something about them contrary to the will of God or worry about them or misunderstand them because Jesus had not yet taught them all they needed to learn or filled them with His Spirit, Jesus stated another general principle for all believers to follow in similar situations. “Let them alone,” Jesus said: avoid them, do not waste your time trying to change them or their thinking, and do not try to punish them. These leaders have chosen to blind themselves to the truth, to the true meaning of the Bible, and they are guiding people like themselves, people who have chosen to be blind to the truth (to not see the truth or obey the truth), blind to the truth of God and the truth about God, blind to God’s purposes and will instead of trying to obey God. Eventually, these leaders and their followers will naturally suffer the consequences of their unrepentant ways. From reading the entire Bible, we know that Jesus did not teach that there should not be appropriate church discipline. But in some situations (such as the case with these false teachers and the powerless disciples), Jesus’ followers need to avoid false teachers and leaders, those who teach contrary to the Word of God, those who do not love and honor God or God’s laws by their words and actions.

(Matthew 15:15) But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.”

The fact that the disciples were not yet prepared to confront false teachers, though Jesus was prepared to confront them, is demonstrated by Peter’s question about the parable. Perhaps Peter understood about the perilous position of false religious leaders and teachers and how to leave them alone. But the question of the Pharisees and scribes and Jesus’ answer to them had left him puzzled, perhaps because he had been eating with unwashed hands and these leaders had confronted him directly after Jesus spoke to them. Peter wanted to be certain that he was obeying the word of God, so He asked Jesus for further explanation.

(Matthew 15:16) Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding?”

Jesus’ question to Peter indicated that Peter ought to be able to understand these truths by this time. The fact that Jesus patiently corrected any and all misunderstandings of His disciples, and the fact that Jesus answered their questions and made certain that they understood His parables and teachings give people additional confidence that the writings of the New Testament faithfully and truly represent exactly what Jesus taught and did and the spirit of His ministry.

(Matthew 15:17) Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?

Jesus began to teach Peter a simple lesson of biology and human anatomy. Ritual washings were not important before every meal and performing them would not spiritually clean the inside of a person. If someone was hungry, they could eat without the necessity of first performing the religious ritual of washing their hands. Jesus could have explained what we know about germs and the spread of disease if we do not usually take the time to wash and eat with clean hands, because the world was created through Him, but that was not the point of the question of these leaders (they were not concerned about personal hygiene; they wanted Jesus to enforce their religious traditions and make His disciples and other people obey them).

(Matthew 15:18) But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.

Jesus' main point was this: our words, our teaching, our manmade laws, that ignore or set aside God's laws, and our doctrines that deny the truths of the Bible (no matter how "loving" they may seem to us), proceed from a heart that does not love God supremely or know the true God. False laws, false doctrines, false traditions, defile the one who teaches them and the one who hears, accepts, believes, and acts according to them. Just as two blind people (the one following the other) can eventually fall

into a pit or worse, so the teacher and the listener who teaches and believes falsehoods will suffer the natural destructive consequences of not living according to reality, of not living according to what really is.

(Matthew 15:19) For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.

Jesus then listed a series of actions or behaviors that will flow from a person who does not love and obey God according to the Scriptures. The selfish and self-centered person will have evil intentions; just as evil intentions inspired the Pharisees to create a tradition that allowed adult children to dishonor their parents in their old age. Selfishness and lack of love for God and others can lead people to do any or all of the sins Jesus listed and worse. The heart that does not love God supremely will invent all sorts of evils and evil ways. Some religious leaders and others will create doctrines or traditions that will encourage or allow their followers to engage in behaviors the Bible explicitly condemns as contrary to the love and law of God. The Pharisees would eventually slander Jesus, bear false witness against Jesus, and murder Jesus, because their evil intentions and thoughts flowed forth from evil and unbelieving hearts. False religious leaders and teachers today will slander those who teach according to the Bible.

(Matthew 15:20) These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Jesus concluded by saying a person will not be morally or spiritually defiled by eating with ritually unwashed hands. The Pharisees were more concerned about their ritual defilements according to their traditions than they were about moral and spiritual defilements according to the word and law of God because they did not love God. Because their hearts were wrong and they chose not to listen to Jesus, they would not recognize Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God: they remained spiritually blind and Jesus did not want them to try to blind His followers, so Jesus said, “Leave them alone.”

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. What teachings from the Bible did the Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of breaking? Explain your answer.
2. What did Jesus accuse the Pharisees of doing?
3. What commandment of God did Jesus accuse them of breaking? Why do you think He chose that commandment?
4. In what ways do people make void the law of God? In what ways do people make void the word of God?
5. Who (or what kind of people) are Jesus' followers to leave alone? Why might Jesus have advised this response by His followers?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly
International Bible Lesson.

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