

Matthew tells the story of Jesus' life on Earth. He tells the story of how Jesus taught and modeled what it meant to live in the way of Jesus. What it really means to be a whole person. To be the type of person God's created us and called us to be. We will look at how the spiritual leaders of Jesus' day tried to pursue that holiness. We will look at the problem Jesus had and what he said was missing from their approach. We will look at the solution he offers. And finally, we will look at two things we can do in order to pursue and live in the way of Jesus.

First, let's talk about a Winnie the Pooh story. There's a story where Winnie the Pooh and his little friend Piglet have an idea. They want to trap an elephant or as they called it, a Heffalump. Their idea is to dig a pit, and in the pit, they'll put bait, which will trap this elephant. The bait Winnie the Pooh decides to use, as you can imagine, is honey. He decided it was the perfect bait for their trap to catch a Heffalump. So he gets on his stool and grabs his jar of honey thinking it would be the perfect bait. But then he says, "You know what, it says honey on the jar. It looks like honey on and in the jar, but how do we really know its honey?" He didn't want to put out something that wasn't honey to catch the Heffalump. Winnie the Pooh takes his paw and tastes the honey on the outside of the jar. He says, "Oh yeah, this is honey."

But then he thinks, "You know what, how do we know there's really honey in the jar?" He took the lid off and ate a little bit off the top. He says, "This is real honey." Then he said, "How do we really know this is honey all the way down to the bottom of the jar?" Winnie the Pooh then eats the whole jar all the way down to the bottom, and he declares, "I was right. It is honey all the way down."

This is a picture of what Jesus and the spiritual leaders of his day are going to talk about in Matthew 15. They are going to talk about, in this text, the kind of person we need to be all the way down—to be a whole person. What it means not to be disconnected from our internal and external worlds. We want that. Think back to a time when you failed. Think back to what stirred inside you when you failed. It does something in you. But there's also something a little bit different when we fail not just at a task, but when we fail at being the type of person we want to be. Maybe you set out to be a certain type of parent, and you're reminded at different points along the way of how much you don't live up to that. Maybe you set out to be a certain type of leader and over and over you're reminded you're not living up to that. I know you want to be whole people because of what

happens in times like that. It stirs in us and reminds us of this distance between what we want to do internally and what we are doing externally. We're facing this disconnect. We realize we're not whole people. We're not operating out of who we are.

David Brooks, a NY Times columnist, in a fantastic book called *The Road to Character* describes it this way, "You are busy, but you have a vague anxiety that your life has not achieved its ultimate meaning and significance. You live with an unconscious boredom, but not really loving, not really attached to the moral purposes that give life its worth." We feel this disconnection.

Jesus and the religious leaders of his day are going to have a conversation about that. They're going to have a conversation about how we can shrink that distance between how we are internally and how we live externally. We often use this word integrity. Integrity is a word, which comes from the Latin word integer. Integer means interconnected. It means wholeness. It means to be the type of people who are connected inside and out. It means to have navigated what it means to both be and do. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had an opinion on that. Jesus had an opinion on that.

We are going to look at Matthew 15 beginning in verses 1-2.

**Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked,**

**"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" (Matthew 15:1-2)**

We are going to pause here because in order to understand everything that's going to happen next, there is a bit of background and contextualization that we need to understand about the time of Jesus. Matthew tells us about Pharisees and teachers of the law. Pharisee means separated ones, and there were about 6,000 in Jesus' day. These were people who made a vow and a commitment. Their commitment was to observe every detail of God's law. They had a couple of different things that they interpreted as God's law. One was the written law or what we would call the Old Testament, but they also had what they called the oral law. The oral law was an elaboration of the written law.

For example, the written law said, "*Honor your father and mother.*" Someone came along and said, "What does it mean to honor?" Religious people would have conversations and decide what it means to honor. They held both the written and oral

law in high regard and said, "This is what it means to be whole people, to be people of integrity."

They were so passionate about their way of life that they were missionaries, Jesus tells us later in Matthew. They wanted other people to do this too. There is something good in that, but there is also something that begins to break down as Jesus is going to point out.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law journey from Jerusalem up north to Galilee to see Jesus. This is probably a week-long journey during that particular time. Imagine these religious leaders spending a week, one way, traveling to go see Jesus. They have a question for him. "Why don't you wash your hands?" Really? Seven days for that question? I know what you're thinking, "That's gross. They didn't wash their hands before they ate?" They're not talking about hygiene here. They are talking about the relationship between the written law and the oral law.

Let's take it back even further. We are going to come back to the text, but we need a little more background first. Let's step back into history in order to understand this whole hand washing thing they're talking about. It's not about hygiene; it's something more. Hundreds of years earlier, God called the nation of Israel. He chose them out of all the nations of the earth. He called them to be a unique people so they would influence the rest of the world around them. They were not called to be obscure or isolate, but to influence. With that came some ways they were to live in order to be different and influence the world, so the world would see the true God.

Think of it this way. If you were a part of a new startup, and you get together with your team, you would say something like what God wanted for the Israelites. You might say, "We want to be different. We're going to influence the market in a different way. We're going to operate differently as a company than anyone else has operated." You're not doing it to be obscure or to be irrelevant. You're doing it because you think you can influence the market in a way that other companies have not influenced the market. God called Israel to live differently than everyone else so they would be an influence in the world and the world would begin to see the true God through them.

One of the ways they were to live differently was through their meals, through their eating. They had certain foods that they did and did not eat. Over time, that written law of what they ate and didn't eat was expanded, and they created the oral law or as Matthew described, the tradition of the elders. They had to interpret, "What does it mean to have a holy meal in the way of God?" So they started doing ceremonial washing of the utensils. They started doing ceremonial washing of the bowls and the plates that they used. They even started looking at themselves and thought, "How can we approach a meal in a holy way as the people of God?" So they even developed hand washing, which

was ceremonial, not hygienic. To say, "We're going to enter into this holy moment of having a meal together."

The point of all that is when they talk about hand washing or what we could call this ritual purity, they're talking about what it means to be the people of God. They said, "In order to be a whole person, we're going to have to practice things this way. We have to do these things. Then we'll be the kind of people God is calling us to be.

That's the context. So this is a conversation about what it means to be whole, to be integrated, to be the same person inside and out. Read how Jesus responds to them.

**Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God, they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:**

**"These people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.  
They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are merely human rules."  
(verses 3–9)**

In essence, Jesus is saying, "Okay, you want to have a conversation about what it means to be whole? Do you want to have a conversation about how to shrink that difference, that disconnectedness? Let's talk about this," he said to the spiritual leaders.

"The way that you're teaching people, it's not working. Jesus is saying, "In fact, you're actually making the situation worse."

To give an example, he used the example, "*Honor your father and mother.*" In Jesus' day, the tradition or oral law said that in order to honor your father and mother you could do a number of different things that actually didn't even involve them. Imagine it this way. Say your parents needed money to pay their monthly utility bill. They need \$500 this month and your going to give it to them because you feel like this is a way you can honor them. As you're writing the check, a thought comes to your mind. "What about instead of giving this to my parents to meet their needs and honor them, I give it to the church instead." We would say, "That's nice, but that's not really honoring your parents or meeting their needs. You're ruining both things. You're ruining the act of honoring your parents, and you're ruining the act of giving freely from the heart to God.

Jesus said, "Look, you've developed a tradition that allows you to leave your parents destitute and still go home and sleep at night." Jesus said, "That not right. That's not what it means to

be a whole integrated person." He told the religious leaders that they were not dealing with the problem. He said they were enabling people to break integrity. He told them Isaiah prophesied about this. Isaiah was a prophet hundreds of years earlier, but Jesus is saying, "Hey you are part of the story. You're repeating destructive patterns of the past." Jesus was saying they needed to be the same type of people all the way at the bottom of the jar.

It's easy to pick on the Pharisees, but in a lot of ways, the Pharisees represent us. We have this frightening ability to break between our internal selves and our external selves. We have this frightening ability to avoid being the type of people at the bottom of the jar that we are on the outside. We can promote our successful outer selves and meanwhile be in inner turmoil. We can cause pain to another person and sleep well at night. Maybe you feel that distance at times in your life and say, "How do I even reconcile what I'm doing and who I am?" The Pharisees represent a little of us.

Jesus has a different way. Here's the good news and the different way Jesus shows the Pharisees, teachers of the law, the people of that day and to us today. First, he gives a parable and highlights the problem. We read,

**Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them." (verses 10–11)**

He uses the image of eating. He stays on that theme. He gives them a parable. The parable is a bit cryptic, but it's also a bit revolutionary. Here is the essence of the parable. Your doing comes from your being.

Jesus said they were saying, "If I do the right thing, somehow I'll be the right person." Jesus was telling them it was actually the other way around. It doesn't mean that we stop doing things or meeting our responsibilities, but it all starts with who you are. Who you are drives what you do and how you operate in the world. Jesus is saying the doing starts from being. Be first and then do. They had it flipped.

Another way to put it is Jesus saying, "You can't just wash hands and then pretend your interior world is going to be okay." Something in of us has to change before something outside of us or about us will. We live out of who we are. He goes on,

**Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" (verse 12)**

We already heard why they are offended. They're part of the problem. They're repeating patterns of the past. They're not actually connecting people with the way of God. The disciples said, "Jesus, you offended them in this." Jesus continues,

**"He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.**

**Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." (verses 13–14)**

In other words, they are not helping people get connected; they're actually making it worse.

**Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."**

**"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person, but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them." (verses 15–20)**

Jesus is saying the evil things he listed are not only external things, but they are reflective of something internal in us. He's telling them they are going about it the wrong way. They are trying to do in order to change, but we have to change in order to do. There is both tragedy and hope in Jesus' words. There is tragedy because I read Jesus talk about the human condition. Maybe you read that as well. Maybe you know there is distance in your own life between who you are internally and what you present externally.

We are all capable of verse 19. You may say, "I would never do those things that are listed in this verse." Maybe, but you would have your own list. We each have our own list. We have, in some way, lived outside who we were meant to be. Jesus is talking to us. He's talking about what it means to be human in a sin-marred world that creates distance. We are the type of people that live in ways that we shouldn't be living because it doesn't resonate with who we are.

But there is also hope because Jesus tells us what's required to be whole people. He implies what's required to be the type of people we need to be and the way of that is to be renewed. In his list is the implication that in order to be the people we need to be something in us needs to change. We need to be renewed internally in order to live renewed externally. Maybe that doesn't sound like hope because maybe that sounds like something even harder than however you've been trying to work this thing out. But here's the hope. The story of Jesus as it unfolds is the story of God who is making people new.

Maybe to be new, maybe to be the type of people where that distance starts to shrink, maybe to be the type of people where at the bottom of the jar is the same as at the top of the jar, it is you and I willing to participate with what God is already doing. Because the story of Jesus, if you're not familiar with it, is the story of a God who has died for you. It is the story of God and his spirit who is making you new and renewing you. And maybe for you and me, it's finding ways to participate with that.

Paul, one of the first followers of Jesus, talked about this way in his letter to the Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians he had these

two ideas, and he said in chapter five, if anyone is a follower of Jesus and they have committed their lives to Jesus, they are new. They are a new creation. In other words, that dissidence that we often feel has changed. There is an abject truth that if you are a follower of Jesus, you are new. You say, "I get that, but I also feel what it's like to not live that." That's what Paul says a chapter earlier. Paul said, "Yes we're new, and at the same time we're being renewed." If you are a follower of Jesus, you live with these two truths, you are new and God is renewing you. That is hope. That's hope that we can be the type of people that live as whole integrated people being the same type of person inside and out. We can live that way. Doesn't mean everything is going to be perfect. Doesn't mean you're going to be perfect, but we can shrink the distance that we are often tempted to widen because God has made you new, and he is at work in you, renewing you.

Today God is at work renewing you. He's active in your life for your good. Those are the constant realities if you are a follower of Jesus. If you are not a follower of Jesus, that's why we so desperately want you to follow him. Because his way is better than the way of the Pharisees or people like them that cause us to look at things the wrong way and not accomplish what we absolutely need to accomplish.

What do we do with this? How do we embrace the kind of transformation that God wants to do in each of us? The first way is choosing to see life from a different perspective. That's what Jesus said to the Pharisees. He said, "You're looking at this from the wrong angle. You're over here thinking, "If I wash my hands enough, somehow I'll be a different person." Jesus told them it was the wrong way to look at it. You'll do who you are. It's be and do not do to be. There's a fascinating thing in the Bible with the followers of Jesus, which is as they map out and try to articulate with it means to live in the way of Jesus, something very interesting happens when they talk about doing. Their doing is always followed by a reminder of who they are in Jesus. It's never just a task. It's living a certain way because that's who you are. They have a fascinating schema that doing is driven by who we are and who we should be in the world. Think about it this way. What if we started living and asking ourselves the question if what we are doing is aligned with who God has made us and who God is making us to be. If it doesn't, maybe it's not something we should be doing. We should ask ourselves if what we are doing is bringing out the beauty of what God is doing in our lives right now? If it is destroying that, it is something we don't

want to do. You can create rules left and right, but what if we started from a different perspective? Here is the reality of what Jesus died for, which was who he has made us to be and who he is making you to be. How then should we live? We choose to see this thing from a different angle just like Jesus showed the spiritual leaders of his day.

The second thing we can do is to ask God, through the power of his spirit, to make us new. Some of you reading this may think that sounds like church talk. People have used phrases like this ad nauseam, but there is real power in it. If you prayed that God would do something new. At the least what it would do is position you to participate in what God is already doing in you. It would help you see from a different perspective that it's not just you trying to figure out this upside-down world that you are somehow in the middle of. God is at work because he is for you and he is working for your good. What would if you prayed that short prayer every single day for a week. What if we prayed, "God make me new today. Renew me. Show me how you are renewing me today." What would happen? How would your doing be reshaped by your being?

Dallas Willard wrote a lot around this topic, and he said this about Jesus,

"Jesus' enduring relevance is based on his historically proven ability to speak to, to heal and empower the individual human condition. He matters because of what he brought and what he still brings to ordinary human beings, living their ordinary lives, coping daily with their surroundings. He promises wholeness for their lives" (Willard, 12-3).

Jesus promises that somehow we can shrink the distance. It doesn't mean that everything is going to be perfect. But somehow in the middle of it, in the ordinariness of an upside down world, you and I can find a way to live in the way of Jesus. To live a life here that has a sense of eternity in it. That somehow we can start to shrink the gap.

God is for you. God is working for you. That is the good news for us today. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are new and being renewed. We don't have to live disconnected anymore. Somehow in the every day, we can participate and embrace the new thing that God is doing in each of us. God cares for you. He is at work in you. The call is for us to humble ourselves and participate in

walking with him in the way of Jesus.  
*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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