



Real Devotion

JESUS REJECTS SUPERFICIAL RELIGION.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 15:1-11,16-20 Memory Verse: Matthew 15:8-9

Several implications arise out of this lesson about which leaders can challenge the adults in their groups. One implication for believers is to examine where we have allowed our traditions to go beyond the limits of the Word of God. Many Christ followers accept extra rules that leave us carrying a heavier burden than God Himself ever intended. Even more important, believers need to examine whether any of our traditions work against God's Word. Often, man-made regulations actually diminish the power of God's Word in our lives. We never want to be guilty of ignoring or circumventing what God has said in order to follow our own agenda.

Finally, this lesson challenges us to examine our spirituality. We need to steer clear of superficial, outward conformity to rules and expectations that are designed to meet the approval of others. Instead, we are called to pursue what arises from God's Word and moves us to be transformed by His Spirit. As you dig into today's passages, take time to examine these points in your own life. Then ask God to help you know the best way to share them with the adults in your Bible study.



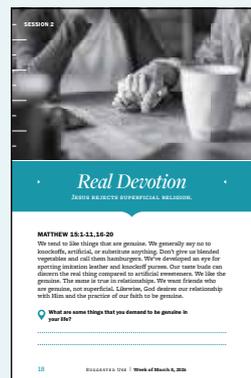
Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

Scan here to gain insights about this week's study on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or at goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training.



We tend to like things that are genuine. We generally say no to knockoffs, artificial, or substitute anything. Don't give us blended vegetables and call them hamburgers. We've developed an eye for spotting imitation leather and knockoff purses. Our taste buds can discern the real thing compared to artificial sweeteners. We like the genuine. The same is true in relationships. We want friends who are genuine, not superficial. Likewise, God desires our relationship with Him and the practice of our faith to be genuine. (PSG, p. 18)

What are some things that you demand to be genuine in your life?



Understand the Context (Matthew 15:1-39)

The opening word of chapter 15 (“then”) could indicate some aspect of sequence after the events of chapter 14. Primarily, though, it provides an introduction to the event examined in this session. The passage underscores the rising conflict that marked the attitude of the religious leaders in Jerusalem toward Jesus.

The concerns of the Pharisees seem to have begun with good intentions; but, over time, these leaders ended up taking people in the wrong direction. For example, the fourth commandment stated that the Jews must avoid working on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14). But what constituted work? In Numbers 15:32-36 a man was executed for gathering sticks on the Sabbath. How would one know what was work and what wasn't, what was allowed and what was forbidden?

Likewise, according to the Mosaic law, priests were required to wash their hands (and feet) before performing their duties in the tent of meeting (Ex. 30:18-21; 40:30-32) or eating the sacrificial meal (Lev. 22:4-7). However, Moses also taught that the Lord considered the whole nation to be a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6). Thus, the Pharisees reasoned that the requirements of the priests should apply to everyone in the covenant community.

In order to help pious Israelites define these matters, an abundance of regulations and traditions grew up and were passed down from generation to generation. With the best of intentions,

rabbis tried to build a “fence” for the law, much like we put up guardrails to keep people from getting too close to danger or too close to the edge. Soon, however, the cautions took on a life of their own and multiplied exponentially. The rules were codified first in the Mishnah and later in the Talmud. Eventually, whole commentaries were devoted to various topics of the law.

The episode on which this lesson is based divides into three natural sections. In the first scene, the Pharisees and scribes confronted Jesus over the actions of His disciples related to ceremonial washings before a meal (vv. 1-9). In verses 10-11 Jesus instructed the crowds based on the challenge from the religious leaders. Then in verses 12-20 Jesus elaborated further on the matter to His disciples.

The whole episode ends where it began, returning in verse 20 to the conclusion of the challenge raised in verse 2. This episode includes an abundance of direct speech—from the Pharisees and scribes, from Jesus, from the disciples, and from Peter.

Read Matthew 15:1-11, 16-20 in your Bible. Identify what was superficial about the religion of the Pharisees. (PSG, p. 19)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Make copies of **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Traditions of the Elders*).

ASK:

What are some things that you demand to be genuine in your life? (PSG, p. 18)

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 18 of the PSG. Highlight the importance of genuine relationships, especially when it comes to one's relationship with God.

ASK:

What are some things that can make our relationship with God superficial?

EXPLAIN:

Point out that, in Jesus's day, religious leaders had added so much to God's laws that it was hard to know what was true and what was legalism. Summarize this content from *Understand the Context* (PSG, p. 19) to provide additional context:

“In Matthew 12, the Pharisees had challenged the disciples and Jesus over failure to keep their traditions regarding the Sabbath. In chapter 15, these religious leaders challenged the disciples and Jesus concerning their failure to keep dietary laws regarding the ceremonial cleansing of the hands. Jesus condemned the Pharisees and scribes for their unbelief and their adherence to man-made tradition. . . . [Jesus] pointed out that what a person eats doesn't make a person unclean. Rather, uncleanness comes from within a person's heart.”

TRANSITION:

Over time, the Jewish religious leaders began focusing on their own man-made rendition of God's genuine law. Today, we'll consider Jesus's definition of true religion.



Group Activity Option

Music

Select a traditional or contemporary version of “Be Thou My Vision” for your group. Play the song and challenge adults to listen to the words carefully. Ask: ***What phrases in the song point toward a genuine bond between a worshiper and God?***

Broken Rules (Matt. 15:1-6)

1 Then Jesus was approached by Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, who asked, **2** “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they don’t wash their hands when they eat.” **3** He answered them, “Why do you break God’s commandment because of your tradition? **4** For God said: Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death. **5** But you say, ‘Whoever tells his father or mother, “Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a gift committed to the temple,” **6** he does not have to honor his father.’ In this way, you have nullified the word of God because of your tradition.”

(v. 1) Matthew named the **Pharisees** more than any other Gospel writer (29 times). According to Josephus, at the time of Jesus there were more than six thousand Pharisees, making them the largest sect of Judaism. For the most part, they were centered in Jerusalem.

Pharisee means “separatist.” They were proud of their rigorous keeping of both the written law of Moses and an oral law passed down over time. The primary stress of the Pharisees was on ritual purity, Sabbath observance, and tithing.

Scribes were “experts in the law” (Luke 11:45-46,52; 14:3) and “teachers of the law” (Luke 5:17; Acts 5:34). They not only copied the law, but they also taught their interpretation of God’s Word. Some *scribes* were Pharisees, but not all Pharisees were scribes. Some also were members of the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews (Matt. 26:57-59). The Pharisees and scribes came all the way from **Jerusalem** to Galilee, suggesting they were an official entourage.

(v. 2) With a judgmental spirit, the leaders asked why Jesus let His followers **break the tradition of the elders**. The fact that they applied their question to the disciples rather than directly to Jesus was a subtle way of attacking the teacher by attacking His students. *Break* is a present tense word that indicates a continuous practice.

The so-called *tradition* referred to all the rules and regulations passed down in an oral law through the rabbis. The Pharisees believed these traditions were as binding as the written law. Failure to **wash their hands** before eating was not just about hygiene, but about ritual purity.

(vv. 3-4) Rather than answering their question, Jesus posed one of His own, contrasting **God’s commandment** with **your tradition**. In this challenge, He used their own word: **break**. Jesus’s disciples broke tradition, but the Pharisees more

seriously broke God’s ordinance. In fact, Jesus said their **tradition** led them to violate God laws. The fence that was supposed to protect Israel became the cause of the people’s disobedience.

Jesus focused on the command to honor one’s parents. He quoted two Old Testament passages—Exodus 20:12 (Deut. 5:16) and Exodus 21:17 (Lev. 20:9)—and attributed both to **God**. The **honor** due parents is positive and required. Speaking **evil** of them is negative and forbidden. It was taken so seriously that it demanded violators be **put to death**.

Key Doctrine

Salvation

Regeneration is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. (See Luke 13:3; John 3:3.)

(vv. 5-6) **But you say** is emphatic and sets the Pharisees against what God says. The specific example Jesus mentioned concerned a person who would withhold benefits from his parents by committing them **to the temple**. By designating one’s estate as a gift to the temple, a person could claim that he could not use those resources to support his elderly parents, even though he still owned them and could use them for himself during his lifetime.

Applying the strongest double negative available in Greek, Jesus said that such people did not **honor** his parents, but they actually **nullified** (or invalidated) **the word of God**. Indeed, it was human **tradition** that opened this loophole and led people to use this legal subterfuge.

EXPLORE Matthew 15:1-6



APPLICATION POINT: Honor God's laws above all other rules.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 15:1-6** aloud as the group listens for why Jesus was being reprimanded by the Jewish leaders.

CONTEXT:

Point out **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Note that this encounter took place in Galilee, though the leaders had come from Jerusalem. Share this to help identify Jesus's opponents:

The Pharisees were the leading religious party in Israel and were strict adherents to the law of Moses. Even more radical was their personal interpretation and application of the law. Their interpretation, or oral law as it was called, took precedent over the law given by God to Moses. Many of these Pharisees were also scribes who were learned scholars and copyists of the law. As such, they joined the Pharisees in a constant scrutiny of every word and move of Jesus. (PSG, p. 20)

DISCUSS:

Give each learner a copy of **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Traditions of the Elders*). Allow adults a few minutes to scan the article. Facilitate a brief discussion on the difference between man-made traditions and God's Word.

SHARE:

Emphasize that Jesus had little use for man-made rules, so He pointed out the hypocrisy of His accusers. Use information from page 28 of the Leader Guide to explain how the leaders were encouraging people to break God's laws.

ASK:

Why is it easy to confuse human rules with God's commands? (PSG, p. 22)



Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Direct the group to list some of the traditions of their church or denomination on a whiteboard. Lead a brief discussion on why those particular traditions are considered to be so important and whether people see them as ways to measure the spirituality of others. Read Matthew 15:1-6 and encourage the group to consider if these are based on Scripture or simply "human commands." Conclude by challenging adults to consider how they can avoid the trap of substituting such human expectations for true spirituality and purity of heart.

Lip Service (Matt. 15:7-11)

7 “Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said: 8 This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. 9 They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines human commands.” 10 Summoning the crowd, he told them, “Listen and understand: 11 It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth—this defiles a person.”

(v. 7) The term *hypocrites* arose out of the Greek theater and referred to one who acted a part on stage behind a mask. In fact, in Jesus’s day there was a large Greek theater in Sepphoris, near Nazareth. Over time, *hypocrite* came to be applied to people who pretended to be something they were not. Spiritually speaking, this would include those who were not on the inside what they appeared to be on the outside.

After responding to the Pharisees and scribes from the Law (v. 4), Jesus now spoke to them from the Prophets. Specifically, He cited Isaiah 29:13. While *Isaiah* prophesied against the people of his own time in the eighth century BC, Jesus said he also *prophesied correctly about you*—Jesus’s contemporary hearers. This does not mean Isaiah’s words did not apply to his original context, only that what Isaiah said also pertained to this people living in the first century AD.

In saying this, Jesus demonstrated that the Word of God that came in one particular historical setting applies to any similar situation. Put another way, God has the power and authority to apply His prophetic words to any people from any time who demonstrate similar characteristics. His Word is eternal, so it is not limited to a specific people living at one time.

(vv. 8-9) The quotation from Isaiah is appropriate as it expands on Jesus’s previous theme of honor (vv. 4,6): **This people honors me with their lips.** *Honors* is present tense, indicating an ongoing superficial action. *Lips* refers to what people say. This stands in contrast with the word **heart**, which refers to the center or core of one’s being—one’s true self.

Through Isaiah, Jesus emphasized a people who spoke well of God, even though their hearts were **far from** Him. This dichotomy had major negative impacts on both **worship** and **teaching**. Insincere worship means **vain** worship. Jesus likely listed this vain worship first in the sentence for emphasis. It refers to that which is

of no purpose. Ideally, worship brings honor and glory to God. But hypocritical worship is nothing more than outwardly going through the motions.

Second, the Jewish leaders’ doctrinal teaching consisted of repeating **human commands**. The words *teaching* and *doctrines* are related and provide an alliteration in the Greek language—*didaskontes* and *didaskalias*. The Jewish teachers claimed to be sharing divine doctrines when, in reality, they were replacing God’s truth with ideas springing from human origin.

(v. 10) Having called out the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus turned His attention to **the crowd**. He probably addressed them to explain His teaching since the Pharisees were very influential among the common people. Up to this point, these spectators had remained in the background. Now, the leaders would fade into the background as Jesus urged the people to **listen and understand**. Jesus saw this as a teaching moment. Both words are present tense, indicating ongoing actions. The twin terms indicate receiving and thinking about what Jesus was about to say.

(v. 11) In verse 11 Jesus expanded His teaching from ritual hand washing to the broader topic of moral purity. Using two present tense participles He contrasted **what goes into** (*eis*) and **what comes out of** (*ek*). The word **not** comes first in the Greek sentence structure to provide emphasis. In direct opposition to what the Pharisees taught, what enters people is not what **defiles** them, but what comes out of them.

Defilement doesn’t come from simply touching something that easily can be washed off. Instead, it comes from what’s deep inside a person. As Jesus will clarify in verses 18-19, what’s in the heart comes out of the mouth. As a result, genuine purity before God isn’t about food going in. It’s defined by what we allow to rule our hearts each day.



APPLICATION POINT: Pray for your heart to remain close to God.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 15:7-11** aloud, instructing the group to listen for Jesus’s complaints against the Jewish religious authorities.

SHARE:

Explain that the Greek word for “hypocrites” relates to an actor who puts on a mask to play a role. As a group, consider why this term appropriately described the Pharisees and scribes. Briefly discuss how Isaiah’s prophecy supported Jesus’s criticism:

Isaiah denounced the people of his day for their inauthentic worship. They gave the appearance of a genuine relationship with God through their worship. In reality, they were simply going through the motions while ignoring God’s desires. Their relationship with God was shallow at best, and non-existent at worst. . . . Because following God’s law perfectly is unobtainable, it was easier to create man-made rules that could be followed successfully. Keeping these traditions would provide a sense of self-satisfaction and pride. But following man-made traditions actually moved them farther from God. (PSG, pp. 22-23)

GUIDE:

Note that Jesus turned His attention to the crowd and explained that moral purity begins with the heart. Highlight that what goes into a person’s mouth (like food) has no real impact on spiritual health. Instead, we have to be careful about what goes into our hearts because that is what reveals our spiritual condition, whether we are loyal to God’s Word or drifting farther from Him.

ASK:

What tempts our hearts to drift from God? (PSG, p. 23)

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: A Rulebook

Prior to the session, obtain a rulebook for a popular sport. During the session, show adults the rulebook. Point out that it provides the basics for competition in that sport. Note that rulebooks take other forms like employee handbooks at work or instructions for assembling a toy. Show adults a copy of the Bible. Affirm that God’s Word is the ultimate rulebook for our lives—and no man-made list of rules can compare.

Real Problem (Matt. 15:16-20)

16 “Do you still lack understanding?” he asked. **17** “Don’t you realize that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is eliminated? **18** But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this defiles a person. **19** For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander. **20** These are the things that defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person.”

(v. 16) After Jesus had finished with the Pharisees and scribes (vv. 1-9) and admonished the crowds (vv. 10-11), His disciples gathered around Him. As usual, Peter served as the spokesman, asking Jesus to explain His teaching (vv. 12-15). When Jesus asked, ***Do you still lack understanding?***, He was referring to what He had said in verse 10. The *you* is plural as Jesus was speaking to all of His disciples (v. 12). The rhetorical question is a rebuke for their lack of discernment.

(vv. 17-18) The construction of Jesus’s second question (***Don’t you realize?***) expected a “yes” answer. They should have perceived the meaning of Jesus’s teaching.

Where Jesus said, ***Whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is eliminated***, we might say, “What goes in one end, comes out the other.” Jesus said the waste is eliminated from the stomach through excretion. But Jesus was not merely describing the process of digestion. His point was that this natural, physiological process has no impact on a person’s relationship with God.

Verse 17 explains the first part of Jesus’s statement in verse 11, while verse 18 explains the second part of verse 11. As earlier, ***heart*** refers to the core of one’s being, and that is what defines what ***defiles*** a person before God.

(v. 19) Jesus then gave a sampling of seven sins that arise ***from the heart*** and represent real defilement. The list is not comprehensive by any means, but Jesus emphasized that these sins are rooted in the heart by placing it first in the sentence. In addition, *from* further emphasizes their origin.

First, and underlying all the others, Jesus named ***evil thoughts***. All actions and deeds begin in one’s thinking (see 9:4), so this item serves as an umbrella for the rest. The other sins Jesus named follow the order of the second table of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:13-17; Deut. 5:17-21).

Interestingly, these commands follow the fifth commandment about honoring parents, which Jesus had noted in verse 4.

These sins are plural in Greek to emphasize that they are not merely abstract categories but specific acts committed many times. ***Murders*** violate the sixth commandment. It refers to taking a person’s life with premeditation, which begins in one’s thinking and takes planning (see Matt. 5:21-26). ***Adulteries*** and ***sexual immoralities*** violate the seventh commandment (see 5:27-32; 14:3-4; 19:9). This too begins in one’s thinking (5:27-28), whether one violates their marriage vows or commits other sexual sins.

Thefts are a violation of the eighth commandment. This also begins in the realm of thoughts and violates the tenth commandment related to coveting. The word refers to taking what belongs to someone else for one’s own. ***False testimonies*** refer to lying or committing perjury, violating the ninth commandment (see 26:59-61). ***Slander*** is related to blasphemy. The Greek wording can refer to attacks against another person (Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; 1 Tim. 6:4; Jude 9) or against God (Matt. 12:31-32). Jesus’s plural use of the word covers both.

(v. 20) Again, ***these are the things*** is not meant to indicate a comprehensive list, but Jesus’s use of seven items offers a complete sample. His final pronouncement, ***eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person***, provides a “bookend,” or *inclusio*, to the opening question of the Pharisees in verse 2. Such a simple external act does not have anything to do with true moral defilement before God.

By associating defilement with an internal source rather than merely as contact with external objects, Jesus undermined the whole of the Pharisees’ system of rules and regulations in one stroke!



APPLICATION POINT: Reject superficial religion and focus on what matters most.

READ:

Direct the group to read Matthew 15:16-20 silently, imagining Jesus's voice as He spoke these words.

ASK:

How do you imagine Jesus's tone? Angry? Frustrated? Compassionate? Why?

EXPLAIN:

Point out that Jesus's disciples approached Him in verses 12-15, concerned that He had offended the Pharisees. Share that Jesus pointed out that they were "blind guides" (v. 14) who led people astray. Note that when Peter asked Jesus to explain His teaching, he revealed that he'd missed the point.

CONTRAST:

Read the following content to reveal how Jesus contrasted the physical body with the spiritual one:

It was not so much that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus had said. More likely, they found such a hard teaching difficult to accept. . . . Jesus began His reply by setting up a contrast between the physical and the spiritual. He told the disciples that food is only physical and does not impact the spiritual. Instead, what is eaten goes through the digestive system and is eliminated. No matter how "clean" or "unclean" food might be, eating it does not impact a person spiritually. (PSG, p. 24)

HIGHLIGHT:

Write the word *heart* on the board. Encourage adults to share different ways we use the word "heart" in our culture. Direct them to read Matthew 15:18-20 again silently. Lead a brief discussion on how Jesus was using "heart" as He spoke to His followers. Affirm that the heart is the core of our spiritual lives, so we need to take seriously what we allow to take root in our hearts as believers.

ASK:

How can we evaluate our hearts to prevent sinful attitudes from taking root? Why is it important to examine our hearts for sinful attitudes? (PSG, p. 25)

SAY:

Jesus was pointing His disciples to the most important element: a heart turned to God. No amount of outward obedience or acts of piety can replace a genuine heart of worship and love. If we want to follow Jesus in a genuine way, we have to reject superficial religion the way He did.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 26 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- Honor God's laws above all other rules.
- Pray for your heart to remain close to God.
- Reject superficial religion and focus on what matters most.

REVIEW:

Invite adults to share which is the most difficult for them to obey in genuine faith. Challenge them to spend time in prayer this week reviewing the list and asking God to fill in the gaps they experience in their lives.

DISCUSS:

Direct the group to the second set of questions on page 26 of the PSG. Read the content aloud and instruct adults to silently ponder what they might be substituting for a genuine relationship with God. Remind them that Jesus's questions were given to us to consider today, and we can go to Him with our responses. Share how God has spoken to you personally as you studied this week.

PRAY:

Close the session in prayer, inviting God to help adults honor Him above every other standard. Urge the group to identify ways they can reject superficial religion so God can give them pure hearts as they draw close to Him.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send the group a text or email. Suggest that they review the first set of questions on page 26 of the PSG. Encourage them to share ways they will commit to helping other believers toward a deeper relationship with God. Remind adults that the words of their mouths reflect what is in their hearts.

ADULT COMMENTARY



Want to go deeper in your study?
Explore the Bible Adult Commentary offers additional information and biblical insights related to the key passages.
(Available for purchase at [Lifeway.com](https://www.lifeway.com).)

EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.