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Bread of Life Baptist Church

Matthew 15:1-39

The Heart of Holiness and Hope for the Nations

Holiness. Purity. Spiritual, religious, and ceremonial cleanness. What do these words mean? We use the word *holy* often enough; but what does it mean to be *holy*?

Holiness is to be *blameless before the Lord*; to be acceptable in His sight, to be spiritually *clean and pure*, and to live a life that is “*set apart*” for God - a life that is *pleasing to Him*. The opposite alternative is a life that is *unclean and impure; defiled* by sin, unpleasing to God, and opposed to God Himself and His will. So, then - how do we become *holy*? What does it mean to be *holy, pure, spiritually clean and blameless*?

In his devotional classic, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, Jerry Bridges begins by contrasting the contemporary wrong notions of holiness with a truly biblical definition. He writes,

The idea of exactly how to be holy has suffered from many false concepts. In some circles, holiness is equated with a series of specific prohibitions - usually in such areas as smoking, drinking, and dancing. The list of prohibitions varies depending on the group. When we follow this approach to holiness, we are in danger of becoming like the Pharisees with their endless lists of trivial do's and don'ts, and their self-righteous attitude. For others, holiness means a particular style of dress and mannerisms. And for still others, it means unattainable perfection, an idea that fosters either delusion or discouragement about one's sin.

All of these ideas, while accurate to some degree, miss the true concept. *To be holy is to be morally blameless. It is to be separated from sin and, therefore, to be consecrated to God.*¹

We're often tempted to think of *holiness* in purely *external* terms: what we *do* or *don't do*. These can lead to several *wrong, even dangerous*, ways of thinking: 1. Sometimes, we approach holiness based on *human traditions, morals, and authority*. We boil *holiness and purity* down to a *man-made* list of do's and don'ts. As Jerry Bridges said, for example, “don't smoke, don't drink, no dancing.” Yet God never gave this list in the Bible; none of those three things, in and of themselves, are ever declared sin in the Bible. We're tempted to *go beyond* what scripture says, to declare things *right and wrong* based on *human traditions, man-made authorities and words*, not the Word and authority of God. But when we do this, when we *add to* or *go beyond* the Word and commandments of God, we're not getting *holier* - we're simply *lowering the bar* of

¹ Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1978), 19.

holiness; replacing GOD's standards with our own fallen, earthly standards. But that'll never work - *holiness* is about being blameless before *the Lord* - He sets the standard! Our only hope is to come on *His terms*, not ours.

2. But there's another danger here. We're tempted to think that holiness is simply *what we do or don't do*, as if the heart doesn't matter. But this is simply legalism and hypocrisy. God is after our hearts.

Matthew 15:1-39

These are the very issues Jesus addresses in Matthew 15:1-39. The first-century Jews of his day care a lot about the idea of *holiness*. They would have thought of it in terms of God's Old Covenant Law, given in the Old Testament. After all, the Law gave many rules and commandments, marking off certain *practices, rituals, and people as holy or unholy, pure or impure, clean or unclean*. In fact, the commandments regarding the circumcision, the priests and sacrifices, Sabbaths, even *clean and unclean foods* - all of these marked off Israel, specifically, as God's people, separate from the "unclean" and "unholy" gentile nations of the world; they were set apart to be *holy*. They could not even eat the same foods as non-Jews. Yet it was far too easy for the people of Israel *to miss the point entirely*.

In this chapter, Jesus addresses *the heart of holiness*. First, Jesus address the fact that *holiness* cannot be equated with following a man-made list of do's and don'ts - holiness deals with our standing before God, meaning He sets the standard; so our only hope for holiness will be found not from the words or traditions of mankind, but from the Word God Himself, revealed in Jesus Christ through the Bible. But secondly, Jesus shows that holiness isn't simply *following the rules*; it's not just concerned with what we *do or don't do*, with our behavior, with what we look like on the outside; God looks at *our hearts*, and true holiness flows from a *pure heart*. Finally, Jesus shows us that *being part of GOD's holy people* is only possible *by believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ* - and therefore, is no longer just for Jews, but for *all people in all nations and places* - and that means you, me, and our neighbors.

I. Holiness is based on the Standard & Word of God, Not the Traditions & Commandments of Man (15:1-9)

In verse 1, we're introduced to a *conflict* between Jesus and a group of religious leaders of the Law. A delegation of "Pharisees and scribes" came to Jesus "from Jerusalem." These are

different than the local religious leaders and law teachers we have seen interact with and oppose Jesus so far in the book of Matthew: these are from the capital, Jerusalem, and held greater authority and respect; this was most likely a delegation sent from Jerusalem to go and check out Jesus for themselves; after all, Jesus's life, ministry, teachings, and miracles were often a *direct challenge* to their own teaching. Sure enough, that's exactly what we see here: a *conflict* over exactly which, and *whose*, teachings should be obeyed.

They make an accusation against Jesus and his disciples in v.2: "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." As I said, these are religious leaders and teachers of the Law; they're accusing Jesus and his followers of *breaking the rules*. But here's a very important thing we have to understand about what's going on here: *this was not a command of God* that they were breaking; it was part of the "tradition of the elders." It was not part of God's Law under the Mosaic Covenant; it was not prescribed or commanded in the Old Testament scriptures. It was a *man-made rule*, part of the traditions of the religious leaders and teachers of Israel, passed down and added to over the centuries.

But these religious leaders and teachers had *elevated* the "traditions of the elders" - the teachings and commandments of Man - to the same level and authority of *God's Law - the very word of God authoritatively revealed in the scriptures*.

In fact, Jesus doesn't answer their question directly; he responds with a rhetorical of his own designed to show them that this was exactly what they were doing: clinging to the teachings of man as more authoritative than the teachings and Word of God. He responds, in v.3, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" They elevated their own traditions, teachings, and rules not only to the *same level* as GOD's Law, but even *over and above it!* They justified *breaking God's Law* by replacing it with their own.

Jesus explains what he's talking about in vv.4-6. First, he mentions two explicit commands from God in the Law of the Old Covenant: "For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother.'" which comes from **Ex. 20:12**, "and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die,'" quoting **Ex. 21:17**. But vv.5-6 make clear that the religious leaders devised teachings and traditions that they valued more than this law, and so devised a way for people to *break and disregard* the law of God - yet claiming to be obeying God all the while! To "honor" one's father and mother included caring for them, especially financially, as they grew older, or had great health needs. But man-made teachings were developed that said a man could get out of this

responsibility by claiming, “What you would have gained from me is given to God.” The word for it was “chorban,” as some of your translations might say. In other words, they could say, “Listen, mom and dad, I know you need help - but sorry, I’m devoting my expendable income to the Lord instead!” There are various sinful reasons why someone would do this, not to mention spite; but let’s not miss Jesus’s point: such a person is *claiming* to devote their goods to God in service to him; but on the contrary, they are *disobeying and dishonoring God* by *dishonoring and sinning against their parents!*

In creating, teaching, and obeying these man-made laws and traditions, they *claim* to be obeying and worshipping God; they *claim* to be holy! But Jesus gives them this scathing rebuke: “You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’” (vv.7-9, quoting Isa. 29:13). They claim to be holy and serving God blamelessly, yet they were just *hypocrites* - what they claimed and pretended on the outside could not be further from the truth on the inside. Their hearts were far from the Lord; they did not love him. They did not trust and obey GOD’s Word; they loved the teachings and commandments of men more! And so, despite what they claimed, they elevated man-made *traditions, teachings, and rules* over against the *authority of God’s word*. They taught these man-made words as *doctrine*, justifying their disobedience to GOD; and the consequences are clear: this is the exact *opposite of holiness*. Adding on more rules doesn’t make them any holier; it actually makes them *worse*, yet hardens their hearts as they hypocritically settle into their self-righteousness.

This has a clear application for us today, in our context: ***God Himself and His Word must be our standard for holiness, not man-made rules and traditions.***

The Bible alone is God’s *holy, inspired, and authoritative Word*. As the divine revelation of God, it alone is *inerrant*, meaning it is without error, *and infallible*, meaning that it *cannot* be wrong. God reveals himself to us; God’s Word alone can show us how to know GOD and walk before him blamelessly. Therefore, we must be very careful to not elevate man-made “commandments” and “traditions” to the place of binding *authority* - that is reserved for God and His Word alone.

We're conservative, evangelical Baptists - we affirm this and claim this to be true! AND yet, it is so easy for us to fall into the same trap of replacing God's Word with the word of mankind; sometimes even without realizing we're doing it.

For example, there have been many conservative, evangelical baptists who have declared certain actions to be *sin*, even though the Bible never does so: such as playing cards, dancing, going to the movies, getting tattoos, or drinking alcohol. This list has changed somewhat over the years; some things have been taken off, some added, and some remain the same. All of these things have the potential to lead towards sin, or to be used in overtly sinful, harmful ways. Yet none of them are explicitly sinful themselves; the Bible never declares a rule that they are inherently sinful.

Now, I believe that those who teach and hold to such man-made traditions and rules (such as no tattoos, no drinking, no movies, etc.) as authoritatively binding on others are typically *well-meaning people*. Take alcohol, for example: the Bible *never* says that alcohol is a sin. In fact, we see many examples of people drinking alcohol in good, godly ways, such as giving thanks to God or participating in godly worship; even Jesus drank alcohol! Yet the Bible *does* make clear that it is very possible to drink alcohol in ways that are very sinful and harmful, to ourselves and others; we see many commands and example sin the Bible stating that *getting drunk* or being *addicted and dependant upon* alcohol is sinful, harmful, and a sign that our heart is not where it should be. And examples of this have always been easy to spot. Well, in the late 1800's, there was a lot of poverty and depression in America; so many people turned to the bottle to drown their sorrows, leading to even more pain and sorrow; it was a plague in communities and churches. So, very well meaning people began efforts to stop this. Eventually, what began as principles of wisdom became traditions, so that many American Christians started to consider drinking any alcohol at all a sin. So again, I think there can be a *lot* of wisdom in not drinking alcohol! There are many people who should not drink it; there are many ways in which drinking alcohol *can be sinful*. It is a topic we have to approach carefully, with wisdom. For some, this means total abstinence; but for other godly, mature Christians, this can mean *moderation*.

Now, my point is simply this: we have to be very careful not to accuse someone of *sinning* when God does not do so. If we call something right or wrong, sinful or holy, we must do so because of what *God says*, in the Bible, *not what men and women have said over the years*. Yes, there is absolutely a place for wisdom! So, for example, you might decide for you and your

family, you're not going to drink alcohol at all; or that you will not own a TV or computer or smartphone, to avoid the countless dangers posed by the internet; or you may decide that you can't send your kids to public school and can only homeschool or do a private Christian school; and on and on we could go. These are areas of *Christian Liberty*. These are decisions we have to make, and they require wisdom. But as we do so, we have to be *very careful* that we do not *judge others* who come to a different decision in an area of Christian Liberty. If God says something is a command or a sin, then that is binding on all Christians, and we must listen, believe, and obey. But if He doesn't, and a situation requires wisdom, we must make sure that we *do not elevate man-made traditions, rules, or prohibitions to the level of binding authority*. Even though we may have good intentions, we must take care lest we actually *disobey God* by the very actions we claim are "holy." We must take great care that we do not become judgmental, self-righteous, hypocritical Pharisees.

After all, holiness is not just about behavior, but the heart. And this leads us to point number two...

II. Holiness is Not Merely External, But is a Matter of the Heart (15:10-20)

The Pharisees claim to be holy, claim to be serving and worshipping God, but Jesus's rebuke in vv.7-9 makes clear: they are hypocrites; they look good on the outside, but their hearts are evil and far from God; they don't truly worship or obey God, despite what good actions they do in their lives, because *holiness* is not just about external behaviors, not just about do's and don'ts - it's a matter *of the heart*.

Jesus continues to make this point in vv.10-20, as he turns to teach the crowds. He says, in v.11, "It is not what does into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." Jesus is referencing the Old Testament Law of God; specifically, the many dietary restrictions and food laws. There were "clean foods" that could be eaten, such as certain kinds of fish or beef; but there were also "unclean" foods, such as shrimp, lobster, and pork. These dietary laws set Israel apart from the gentile nations as *holy to the Lord*. And to eat *unclean* foods made someone ceremonially unclean.

So then, someone might say, "Being holy and blameless before the Lord is all about the things that we do externally; our outward behaviors. Keep the Law, and you're pure and blameless; break the rules of the Law, and you're unholy, unclean, defiled." But Jesus makes

clear that it's more complicated than that. In fact, what he's saying here, is that such thinking *misses the point*. The Laws about "clean" and "unclean" foods were given to teach us that there is, indeed, a distinction between those who are *pure, clean, holy, and blameless* before the Lord, and those who are *unholy, unclean, and defiled*. But the point was *never* that those foods in particular made someone unholy or unclean! Rather, they defiled someone because to eat them, as an Old Covenant Jew, was to *explicitly break the command of God* under that Law. Jesus drives the point home more clearly for us in vv.17-18: "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person." In other words, what we eat doesn't defile us - *our sinful hearts do*. What we say and do simply flows *out of our hearts*. Disobeying God flows out of a heart that is *sinful and unholy*. If someone speak an evil word, it proceeds *from the heart*. If they praise God, it proceeds *from the heart*. And so it is with all we speak, say, or do. Verses 19-20 continue: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person."

We're often tempted to boil down "holiness" into *external things* that we either *do or don't do*. But this misses the whole point: a morally blameless, spiritually *clean and pure* life that is *acceptable and pleasing to the Lord*, cannot be boiled down to a list of "do's and don'ts." *True spiritual purity - true holiness* - is a matter of the *heart*. Yes, it will necessarily affect our outward actions, what we *do and don't do* - but it is *so much more than that*. It is to be *truly clean and pure* from the *inside out*; to truly have a right standing before God; a right relationship with Him; to be acceptable and pleasing in His sight, in every dimension of our lives!

Yes, our behavior matters. Yes, there are *morally right things* and *morally wrong things*. But we can never settle for merely external change of behaviors; this will not save anyone. Nor does it fix the problem! Because the problem is with our *hearts*. We don't need to be clean just on the outside; we need to be clean - pure, holy, and blameless before the Lord - *on the inside, in our hearts!* We need hearts that love, trust, and obey God! Hearts set apart and completely devoted to him! Everything else we say and do must flow out from a *pure heart*.

We need new hearts. And that is something that the Law - a list of rules - can *never* produce. But thankfully, that's why Jesus came! Which brings us to point three...

III. Jesus Came to Save Unholy People from the Whole World - Anyone Can be Made Holy in the gospel of Christ (15:21-39)

There is one more radical implication of what we just read from Jesus in v.11. He declared that it's not about the *food we eat* that makes us clean or unclean, but our *heart*. We've looked at what that means on an individual level; but it also has massive implications for what it means *to be part of the holy people of God*. This same story is recorded in Mark 7, yet mark adds this comment in v.19: "Thus, he declared all foods clean." Obviously, we know that today we're no longer under the Old Covenant, nor the food laws. Our response is usually to praise the Lord that our salvation and standing before him does not require that we abstain from bacon, shrimp and lobster - and we should indeed praise the Lord for that! But we also need to recognize the *significance* of what has taken place that allows us to do that.

Think of Peter and Cornelius, in Acts 10. It was very difficult for the early Christians to get beyond 2 things: 1. Giving up the food laws, so that they could eat all foods, and 2. That gentiles could be Christians simply by believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, without becoming full-fledged Jews. And these two issues were *intricately related*. As we've seen, a big part of the food laws was to *make a visible distinction* between God's people and the unclean gentile world. But that has now been fulfilled in the true distinction: whether or not we believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ!

And this is the point being made in the three stories of vv.21-39: the gospel of Christ is not just for Israel, but for *the gentiles as well* - for anyone, anywhere, that believes in Him!

But the first story here, about the Canaanite Woman in vv.21-28, is a little difficult. It opens by telling us that Jesus leaves the region - he not only Galilee, but this time, *he leaves Israel*; he goes outside of Jewish territory into "Tyre and Sidon" (modern-day Lebanon). This is *pagan gentile* territory. In v.22 a "Canaanite woman" comes up to Jesus. If you remember from the Old Testament, Canaanites are *ancient, sworn enemies of Israel*. Yet she comes to Jesus and begs him to heal her daughter (vv.22-23). Yet Jesus's answer is shocking; he tells her *no*. "He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'" While shocking to us, this would not have been the shocking part to his contemporaries; the Messiah was said to come *to save Israel*, not the gentiles. Yet the Canaanite woman shows *persistent faith* in the God of Israel - in Jesus, the Messiah. While she recognizes that she is a gentile, she believes that there is enough grace in God even for the gentiles - that "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their

masters' table." And how does Jesus respond! He commends her faith! "O woman, great is your faith!" And he healed her daughter immediately.

This is a jarring story, but the end makes sense of it all: Jesus's point is that *this is why he came*; it was Jesus's mission to bring salvation to anyone who would simply *believe and have faith in the grace of God!* Jesus came to the Jew first - *but also for the Gentiles - us*; all people in all the world!

The next two stories continue to make this same point. While in the same gentile territory, he performs many of the exact same healings and miracles *there* that he did in Israel (vv.29-31). And how do these pagan gentiles respond? V.31: "And they glorified the God of Israel."

Then we see Jesus miraculously feed thousands, once again, in vv.32-39. We just saw pretty much the same story last week, in the feeding of the five thousand in chapter 14, didn't we? So does Matthew give pretty much the same story - only this time, seeming a little less impressive, with less people, more food to start with, and half as many leftovers? *To underscore the point*: Jesus is sharing the bread of the children of Israel with the "gentile" dogs of the whole world! Jesus pours out his *compassion* and *power* not just on Israel, but for anyone and everyone, in the whole world, who would come to Him! Jesus came to save the *nations!*

These three stories are simply playing out the implications of the *first half* of chapter 15: we're not made holy by laws of man, by external do's and don'ts, not even by belonging to Israel or keeping the Law - *our sinful, defiled hearts can only be made holy by faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ!* Salvation is possible for the entire world because it is based *purely on faith in Christ*. No matter how unholy, unclean, or defiled you or someone else is because of sin, *we, too, are cleansed and made clean, holy and blameless before the Lord* - simply by putting our faith in the grace of Christ Jesus, just like the Canaanite woman!

This displays for us the incredible *grace* of the gospel. This grace is for absolutely *anyone*, no matter our background. It's not about how clean we look on the outside; not about how well you've lived up to this point. It's not about how smart, educated, rich or poor, put-together or crusty, successful or washed out any of us are - we simply have to *believe* the good news of Jesus's incredible love and grace. No matter how unholy and unclean you've been this week, only one thing can make you clean: *the blood of Jesus Christ*, shed on the cross to take away our sin, guilt, and shame - and if you believe in this, then *His grace is for you!* Simply

trust in His grace; simply repent and believe, day by day, letting Christ transform our hearts and live from the inside out. There's no other way to be holy - not for me, for you, or for anyone else!

Therefore, this should drive us to the Lord daily, as we confess and repent our unholy sins, turn to the incredible grace of Jesus to forgive and cleanse us from our sins, and strive to walk in *true purity* - having hearts devoted completely to the Lord.

And this should also drive us to *missions* - to take the gospel to *everyone, everywhere*, no matter how *unclean* anyone thinks they are!

If you have any questions about the gospel of Jesus Christ, about how to become a Christian, about baptism, or about church membership, I would love to speak with you. You can find me after the service, or you can even come down now and wait on the front row.

Let us pray.