

Chapter 60: The Defilement of Sin

Matthew 15:10–20

Although we are taking up Matthew 15:10–20 separately from the first nine verses of the chapter, it is important to recognize that Matthew 15:1–20 constitute a single scene. In the first part of this scene, Jesus had been talking with the Pharisees and scribes who came from Jerusalem to confront him over his disciples' failure to wash their hands ceremonially before eating, according to the tradition of the elders (Matt. 15:1–2). At this point, a basic question arises: If the kingdom of heaven is not characterized by the legalism of the Pharisees and scribes, then on what principle does it operate? Here, Jesus shifts the discussion away from the mechanical and ceremonial to the heart of the matter, since *sin defiles the soul, not ceremony*.

A Parable of the Kingdom (Matt. 15:10–11)

Immediately after repudiating those Pharisees and scribes for their legalism in the previous section, Jesus “called the people [lit., ‘crowd’] to him and said to them, ‘Hear and understand’...” (v. 10). It is unclear what the crowd had been doing up to that point, but the important thing is that Jesus now intends to speak to them: “there was something in the question being discussed that was important for the lowliest worshiper, and Jesus intended the people who were there to understand the significant thing about uncleanness.”¹ This scurrilous charge did not embarrass Jesus, so that he wanted the proceedings hidden from the public eye. This was an important point that got to the heart of Jesus' ministry.

The significance of what Jesus wants to teach is communicated through the words “hear and understand.” As Nolland writes, these words appeared back in Matthew 13:13–15 in the midst of Jesus' parables about the kingdom. Furthermore, Peter will later ask Jesus to explain his “parable” to the disciples, which “suggests that the reader is being encouraged to think of a crowd like that of chap. 13.”² There, Jesus taught about the key spiritual differences that arose from those who truly belonged to the kingdom of heaven. Specifically, those who “understand” in Matthew 13 were “true disciples” (Matt. 13:23, 51), as opposed to those outside the kingdom who fail to understand what they hear from Jesus.³ If Jesus' words in the last section echoed his teaching from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, the introduction to this section echoes the kingdom parable chapter of Matthew 13, where Jesus also spoke to “the crowd” (Matt. 13:2).

If so, then Jesus is signaling that his teaching gets to the heart of true kingdom spirituality: “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 394–95.

² Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 619.

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 582.

person” (v. 11). Here, Jesus is further clarifying how his teaching should be distinguished from the teaching of the Pharisees and scribes. For the Jewish religious leaders, spiritual defilement was ceremonial, external, and formal. For Jesus, spiritual defilement is spiritual, internal, and moral.⁴ So, for the Pharisees and scribes, the food that one ingested through the mouth could be unclean—either by nature, or by eating that food with unwashed hands. The concern did not pertain to physical pathogens that might make the eater sick, but with a spiritual defilement that could render a person ceremonially polluted.

Against that idea, Jesus insists that the words that come out of a person’s mouth are the true source of defilement. By this, Jesus does not mean that words have some kind of magical power in the sounds uttered. Rather, Osborne captures the idea well: “One’s words reflect the heart, and that is the true source of defilement. Words and actions, not external piety, are the true measure of a person.”⁵ If the root of legalism is a hardened heart that is far from God (Matt. 15:8), then the words that grow as the fruit of a hard heart are what truly defile a person (see Matt. 12:33–37).

Plants and Pits (Matt. 15:12–14)

Although Jesus was speaking to the crowds, Matthew only records for us the reaction of the Pharisees through the report of the disciples: “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” (v. 12). The Pharisees may not have understood all that Jesus intended to teach, but they certainly understood that his teaching opposed their prized ceremonial legalism. The full meaning of Jesus’ words are still veiled to such a degree that Peter must later ask for clarification (v. 15), but Jesus has spoken clearly enough to offend the religious teachers.

Furthermore, Jesus is unbothered by their offense. He uses two metaphors to describe the condition—and future fates—of the Pharisees and scribes. First, Jesus says, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up” (v. 13). Commentators disagree as to whether this “plant” refers to people or doctrines; however, the use of tree imagery throughout the Gospel of Matthew consistently refers to both: “doctrine can never be separated from those that teach it, for that is what makes them the persons they are.”⁶ Jesus makes an extraordinary claim when he states that his heavenly Father has not planted them. By this, Jesus explains that “the Pharisees, the leaders of the Jewish people, are not truly part of God’s planting. In other words, they do not truly belong to Israel.”⁷ Therefore, these false teachers will eventually “be *rooted up*, another horticultural metaphor, this one speaking of plants torn up by the roots. This signifies final and complete destruction.”⁸

Second, Jesus instructs his disciples, saying, “Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit” (v. 14). Commenting on Jesus’ instructions to leave the Pharisees alone, Lenski poignantly writes, “Nothing is so terrible as when Jesus abandons a man.”⁹

⁴ On this point, see helpful comments from Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 589; Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 615; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 583–84.

⁵ Osborne, *Matthew*, 588.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 590.

⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 400.

⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 396.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 591.

Here, Jesus explains that, while these men are leaders, they are leading as blind men who have no true knowledge of the kingdom. Ultimately, they will lead themselves and their hearers into a pit. Although the imagery is different in this second comparison, the end in both is the same: being “rooted up” is the same as to “fall into a pit.”

The Problem of Sin (Matt. 15:15–20)

Once again, Peter steps forward in characteristic boldness to ask Jesus to explain his parable to them (v. 15). Jesus expresses surprise that Peter and the disciples (“you” is plural) are “still without understanding (v. 16), but he nevertheless continues to explain his meaning. It is notable that Jesus’ explanation reflects surprise that the disciples still do not understand his meaning: “Do you not see that...?” (v. 17a). This observation seems to reinforce the point that Jesus’ teaching here is central to his ministry. This is not an ancillary part of Jesus’ teaching, but the heart of Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom.

So, Jesus draws a marked contrast between the food that we eat and the spiritual defilements lurking in our hearts. Any food that we eat passes through our digestive track and is ultimately expelled from the body (v. 17). Food takes up no lasting residence in the body, and therefore does not cause any lasting spiritual damage to a person. The heart, however, is different. Because of the forbidden food that our first parents ate, the defilements of sin lurk in our hearts from the beginning. The threat does not come from the outside-in, but from the inside-out. Thus, Jesus explains that, “what comes out of the mouth [i.e., our words] proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (vv. 18–19). Carson points out that after “evil thoughts,” the rest of the sins here follow the order of the Ten Commandments: murder (Sixth), adultery and sexual immorality (Seventh), theft (Eighth), false witness and slander (Ninth).¹⁰

What, then, makes this point so essential? Hagner puts the point well: “The true problem of sin is not to be found in a failure to perform correctly some external minutiae of human making; sin is an interior matter that concerns the evil thought, words, and deeds that come from the heart. Moral righteousness is thus far more important than ritual purity. The fundamental problem of humanity is more basic than the Pharisees dreamed.”¹¹ By implication, then, the earlier context of this passage that reminded us of the kingdom parables of Matthew 13 would also teach us that the true solution to sin is not in some legalistic structure of behavior in accordance with the “tradition of the elders” (Matt. 15:2).

Jesus is pointing to a drastically new way of relating to God. Yet, it is important to note that he insists upon a fundamental continuity to the Old Testament (Matt. 15:4–6) as well as with the order of creation itself (v. 17). Therefore, Carson is correct in writing that “Jesus is not spiritualizing the OT but insisting that true religion must deal with the nature of man and not with mere externals.”¹² Now, in time, the principle that Jesus explains will lead to the overturning of the entire system of the

¹⁰ Carson, “Matthew,” 400.

¹¹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 437.

¹² Carson, “Matthew,” 401.

ceremonial law.¹³ That time, however, had not yet come: “This, however, was no abrogation of the Levitical laws concerning meats. For here the heart would necessarily be involved: forbidden meats could be eaten only by a Jew who was set on disobeying God’s Levitical law.”¹⁴ Both then and now, however, the true problem—and the true solution—to our great problem of sin lays not in external conformity with rites, rituals, and ceremonies, but in the imputed righteousness of Jesus and the spiritual transformation of our hearts through the gospel work of sanctification.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Jesus call the crowd in v. 10? What is the significance of the words “hear and understand” (v. 10) within the wider context of the Gospel of Matthew? What does Jesus mean when he speaks of “what goes into the mouth”? Why does Jesus say that what goes into the mouth will not defile a person? What does Jesus mean by “what comes out of the mouth”? Why can what comes out of the mouth defile a person?
2. Why were the Pharisees offended by Jesus’ teaching (v. 12)? What does Jesus mean when he calls the Pharisees plants that were not planted by his heavenly Father (v. 13)? How does this image connect with Jesus’ imagery of plants and trees through the rest of the Gospel of Matthew? What does Jesus mean when he calls the Pharisees blind guides (v. 14)? In both comparisons, what is the ultimate fate of the Pharisees?
3. Why do you think that Peter and the disciples continued to struggle with Jesus’ teaching on this point? Why does the food that passes through the digestive track have no lasting ability to defile us spiritually? Why, then, do the words that come out of our mouth have the ability to defile us? What connection do these words have to our hearts? What do your words suggest about what might be lurking in your heart?
4. How does this passage connect with Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom in the parables of Matthew 13? How does someone with sin lurking in his or her heart enter the kingdom of heaven? Where are you tempted to justify yourself according to a standard of legalism rather than trusting on the finished work of Jesus Christ? Where are you tempted to sanctify yourself by mechanical ceremony rather than the ministry of the Holy Spirit?

¹³ Osborne, *Matthew*, 591.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 592.