

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 15:10 - 15:20



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this teaching, Steve Gregg discusses the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over ritual hand washing and eating. Jesus dismisses their traditions and teaches the crowd that it is not what goes into a person's mouth that defiles them, but what comes out of their heart. Evil thoughts stem from self-centeredness and self-gratification. Gregg emphasizes the importance of heart transformation in addressing societal problems.

### Transcript

Last time we were looking at Matthew chapter 15 and the opening verses where Jesus received criticism from the Pharisees because his disciples did not follow the ritual methods of washing their hands before eating. This was not, of course, a hygienic practice for the Jews. This was a ceremonial practice.

It had to do with the rituals that were related to defilement and cleanness and uncleanness and so forth. And by cleanness and uncleanness among the Jews, that did not mean anything, didn't have anything to do with real dirt or the absence thereof. It had to do with a symbolic kind of defilement.

This one might contract by touching a Gentile or by touching something that was touched by a Gentile or whatever. I mean, these things were more symbolic uncleanness rather than physical uncleanness. And Jesus indeed didn't care that his disciples neglected this custom.

He called it a tradition of men. And he took to task the Pharisees because they taught for doctrines the commandments of men. And that these traditions of men that they kept were actually kept by them at the expense of obeying some of the things God has actually said to do.

So that when God said to honor your father and mother, the Pharisees had a tradition that allowed people to neglect the care of their father and mother if they had a religious excuse for doing it. Like, well, these things that my father and mother could be benefited by if I gave them to them. Too bad, I can't give them to them because I'm going to dedicate these to God.

Well, let's just use a religious excuse to neglect your duty that God has dictated. And so Jesus said that they make the word of God or the commandment of God of none effect in order to keep their traditions. And he said that Isaiah had spoken of his own generation in such a way as would be applicable to that generation that Jesus was confronting.

And these were the words of Isaiah that Jesus quoted in Matthew 15, 8 and 9. These people draw near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. Now, in verse 10, we continue the story we left off there last time.

Then he called the multitude and said to them, hear and understand not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth. This defiles a man. Then his disciples came and said to him, do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying? But he answered and said, every plant which my heavenly father has not planted will be uprooted.

Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into the ditch.

Then Peter answered and said to him, explain this parable to us. So Jesus said, are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.

These are the things that defile a man. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man. So after this conflict with the Pharisees, Jesus exploited the situation to make an object lesson about spiritual reality to the crowds there.

And he said, now listen everybody. What goes into your mouth isn't what makes you defiled. It's what comes out of your mouth that makes you defiled.

Now in saying that, what was he saying? He's commenting on the fact that the Pharisees objected to eating food with unwashed hands. Now, of course, the reason that they objected to this is because they considered that if you have defiled hands and you touch food, then the food becomes defiled. That is, it becomes unclean.

Just as certain foods were in themselves unclean to the Jews, pork and shellfish and many other animals, foods were unclean and they could not eat them. This had nothing to do with germs. That wasn't at least how they thought of it.

It had to do with just things that would be ceremonially defiling. And to eat pork for a Jew would be to make him unclean as far as he was concerned. It would defile him.

And likewise, to eat any food, even if it was not an unclean food, to eat it with unclean

hands would defile him. And Jesus said, you know, this whole concept of externalistic defilement is putting the cart before the horse, you know. It's not really what goes into you from outside that determines whether you are defiled in the sight of God or not.

It's what's coming out of you from inside that is the measure of defilement. Now, in saying that, Jesus seemed to be saying that all foods are clean because he said a man would not be defiled by anything that went into his mouth. And food goes into the mouth.

And while there are still Christians today who believe that certain foods should be abstained from, there are some Christians who feel that we should be vegetarian. There are others who believe that we should keep the dietary restrictions that the Jews followed. And that, you know, if a food was unclean in the Old Testament, then it's unclean forever and that we shouldn't eat it today.

Now, I understand Jesus to be saying that whatever goes into a man's mouth does not defile him. And he means food, of course. Food does not defile you because it doesn't enter the heart.

He said it goes into your stomach and it's eventually eliminated. It doesn't have any permanent moral impact. Now, the Scripture does indicate that we can eat any foods we wish if we eat them with a good heart.

In 1 Timothy, chapter 4, Paul speaks about this in the first five verses. 1 Timothy 4, verses 1 through 5, Paul says, Now, the Spirit expressly says that in latter times, some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons. That means doctrines that are promulgated by demons.

Speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving for those who believe and know the truth. Then Paul says this in verse 4, For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. So, every animal food can be eaten as far as God is concerned.

Now, some animal foods may be less healthy than others to eat. And a person might be a vegetarian for health reasons or might abstain from certain animal foods for health reasons, but one should not do so for conscience reasons. They should not do so for moral reasons, because there's nothing immoral about eating any kind of food.

Jesus himself said that. It's not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles him. It's what comes out.

Now, Paul had a hard time getting that across without people misunderstanding him. When he came to the Corinthians, there were some practices that the Corinthians had

been involved with that Paul had to correct. And when Paul came to Corinth, he came to a place where there was great idolatry, and there were public feasts in the idol temples.

And people would go, and they'd eat this food sacrificed to idols, and they'd participate in the worship of the idols by doing so. And Paul, of course, told them that they have to give up their idolatry, although he did not want to make them think that eating certain kinds of foods was in itself defiling. In fact, he makes it very clear that eating food sacrificed to idols is not innately harmful, but idolatry associated with that eating is harmful.

Now, in the idol worship, in the idol temples, they also had sexual orgies, because in the pagan religion, sex with prostitutes was part of the worship of the pagan gods. In fact, the priestesses in Corinth were prostitutes, and they were priestesses in the idol temples. So, the Christians in Corinth had been accustomed to going to these feasts in the idol temples, worshipping the idols, and having these immoral sexual encounters.

Now, when they became Christians, of course, they gave up their idolatry, they gave up these sexual encounters, and so forth, and they also gave up, of course, going to the idol feasts. However, some people began to feel like, well, we can eat meat sacrificed to idols, can't we? Because some of this meat came to be distributed in the marketplace. This meat, the remnants of animals that were sacrificed in the temples to the idols, were now sold on the marketplace.

And some Christians thought, well, we can't eat meat sacrificed to idols, so they wouldn't eat it. Others thought, well, no, there's nothing wrong with this meat. And so, Paul taught on this, and Paul said, well, you know, there's really nothing wrong with eating the meat sacrificed to idols.

It's just a piece of meat. And some Corinthians mistook him on that, and thought that that meant it's okay, then, to go into the temples, and to participate in the rest of the festivities. Paul said, all things are lawful for me, and he meant by that, all food is lawful for me.

But they thought that meant everything is lawful. You can go into the idol feasts, you can worship the idols, and have, you know, consort with the prostitutes, and so forth. But Paul had to correct that.

And so, if you would, for example, see what he said to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, and verse 12, he says, all things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under power of any. Foods for the stomach, and the stomach is for foods, but God will destroy both it and them.

Now, the body is not made for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. So, he goes on to talk about the need for Christians to abstain from sexual

immorality, but that's in the context of saying that food is one issue. Sexual immorality is another.

You know, when it comes to idolatry, the pagans would eat food sacrificed to idols, and they would commit sexual immorality. Now, one of those things is defiling, and one is not. Eating food, whether it's sacrificed to idols or not, is not innately defiling, Paul said, just like Jesus said.

It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles them. Of course, the sexual immorality, that's a different issue. That comes out of the heart.

That is something that is not merely an external thing that passes through the stomach and is eliminated. Now, Jesus told the disciples, whatever enters your mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated, but those things which proceed out of the mouth, those come from the heart. Now, Jesus is saying this, that true defilement is a matter of the inward man.

You can live totally clean like the Pharisees and not touch one unclean thing and have a wicked heart, and as far as God is concerned, you are a defiled individual. Everyone else around you might think you're pious and holy because you observe all the religious traditions of your group, but in your heart, God knows you're defiled, and if you're defiled in that area, that's where it matters to God. You will have to answer to God for those things, and the answering will not be pleasant.

So, Jesus is saying, listen, don't worry about this outward defilement the Pharisees are concerned about that's made up of things like what you eat and what you touch. It has to do with what's in the heart and what comes out of the mouth. Of course, the words you speak are among those things that come out of the heart.

Elsewhere, of course, in chapter 12, Jesus said, out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. So, when he talks about what comes out of the mouth, he's talking about the overflow of what's in the heart, but here he says there's more than that in the heart, and it's those things in the heart that defile a man. He says in verse 19, for out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.

These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man. Now, he said these are the things that come out of the heart, and these are the things that defile a man. What? Well, evil thoughts.

What constitutes evil thoughts? What makes a thought evil? Well, a thought is evil if it is, first of all, self-centered and self-serving and self-gratifying. Now, there's nothing wrong with enjoying life, so long as the enjoyment is not done as an idolatrous pursuit of pleasure, but the point is that when we make it our goal to enjoy life and we have no

higher principles than that, then we end up enjoying life at the expense of others. If enjoying life means that I have sex with as many people as I want to, then that means that if I have no higher principle than to enjoy life, I become a womanizer.

If enjoying life means that I have possessions in abundance without any kind of limit, then, of course, if I can't earn them, I might want to steal them or cheat people out of them, because if I have no higher principle than to enjoy my life, then I end up doing evil things. Now, when my thoughts are governed by self-interest and they are not governed by some higher principle, like love for God and concern for keeping His commandments, then my thoughts are going to be on evil things. I'm going to be contemplating how I can serve myself, and if I don't have any higher principle than that, I'm going to be contemplating how I can serve myself at the expense of others, because that's generally how self-service happens.

If I am seeking in my thoughts only to glorify God, then I will, of course, not be so concerned about how much I'm pleasing or gratifying myself, but how much I'm doing what's right in the sight of God and pleasing to Him. And those are the only kind of thoughts that are decent and right. All thoughts that are selfish, even if they are somewhat innocent or seemingly innocent, they are the kinds of thoughts that lead to all kinds of exploitation and use of other people immorally and so forth.

And the only way that we can keep our thoughts from being evil thoughts is to have on our mind the compelling motive to glorify God and not to necessarily please ourselves. Self-centered thoughts are going to be thoughts which are quickly angered when people don't do what we want them to do. We'll bear grudges and be offended and hold it against people who have wronged us because they've interfered with our happiness.

And we will have, therefore, resentment and bitterness and anger. We'll have jealousy. There will be fear that will be there.

And fear, that can be an evil thought, too, because fear often is simply concern about self and nothing more. There will be lust and greed, and there will be hatred. These are the evil thoughts that come to our minds when self is all that we're concerned about.

In Philippians chapter 4, Paul tells us what things should be in our minds, what kind of thoughts should be there. In Philippians 4, he says, Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there's anything virtuous or if there's anything praiseworthy, meditate on these things. In other words, we should keep our thoughts and our minds on things that are praiseworthy and virtuous and just and good.

And that is a control of our heart that we are required to maintain. In Proverbs chapter 4 and verse 23, it says, Keep your heart or guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it

are the issues of life. That is, the issues of your life flow out from the springs of your heart.

And what Solomon is saying there is that your outward behavior and its quality is dictated by the quality of your heart and your thoughts. And you should guard your heart and your thoughts for that reason. That's Proverbs 4, 23.

And Jesus is saying the same thing, from out of the heart proceed evil thoughts. And some of these things, murders, adulteries, fornications. You know, there are social problems in our world today that the politicians just don't know how to solve.

They can't figure out why kids are murdering kids in the schools. And why fathers murder their children. And husbands murder their wives and so forth.

And mothers murder their children. I mean, these things are going on. And children murder their parents.

Where is this murder coming from? They think it's the problem. They think, take the guns away, that'll do it. However, you know, not too long ago, most of us can remember a woman who killed her children by putting them in the back seat of a car and rolling it into a lake and drowning them.

She didn't have a gun. What are you going to do, take cars away from people next? It's not a problem with guns. It's not even a problem with cars.

It's a problem with hearts. Out of the wicked heart proceed murders. People murder because their hearts are evil.

You can take away every weapon that's ever been, you know, within reach of them. And they will find other ways with their bare hands to murder each other if that's what they're determined to do. Fornications and adulteries are listed here as some of those defining things that come out of the heart.

You know, another social problem we have is, of course, teen pregnancy and promiscuity and abortion. And all of these things come from fornication. And adultery, that's what's breaking up marriages.

In fact, divorce in most cases is adultery. And we've got to, you know, the homes of America are breaking up because of divorce. And divorce, if it's not grounded in adultery, becomes adultery, is adultery itself.

Now, these are social problems, but they're moral problems that come from the heart. And American politicians can try to make laws, you know, well, use condoms and we'll limit pregnancy or whatever. But, you know, there's AIDS as a problem.

I mean, you've got all kinds of things related to misbehavior. These are all lifestyle-

related diseases and social problems. And yet it seems that those who are in the dark, who don't know Jesus and don't follow his teaching, have no idea what the solution is.

And obviously the solution is a changed heart. These things come from evil hearts. And people don't seem to put two and two together.

That if kids are taught to not see themselves as creations of God made to honor and to please him, if they're taught to esteem themselves and seek their own happiness, if they are fed a constant diet of humanism that doesn't include any obligation to God but just watching out for number one, if they're taught that we got here through a process of survival of the fittest, and they might as well survive by being fit too and, you know, exploit others who are less fit, if they're fed with a constant diet of violence and immorality in their entertainment industry, their hearts are, what are they going to be but corrupt? And these defiling things are in the hearts of the people who are causing these problems. It's not a political problem. It's a moral problem in the heart.

Jesus said, Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness. That would be plagiarism and, excuse me, perjury and those kinds of things, lying, cheating, blasphemies. There are certainly plenty of these things that make up the dominant problems in our society, I think.

And these are things that come out of the heart. They defile a man. Now, a society is defiled when the people in it are defiled, of course.

And the only solution to these problems is, of course, to have a new heart, to have a pure heart. As David said, Create in me a clean heart of God and renew a right spirit within me. We need a clean heart so that our behavior and our thoughts will be clean.

And that's what Jesus is really offering to us when we are born again. We have an old heart that needs to be replaced. Ezekiel compared it to taking a stony old heart out and putting a softer heart of flesh in where the stone heart was before.

Jeremiah compared it to God writing His rules or His laws on our hearts so that our hearts embrace naturally what God wants us to do. And our hearts are changed. It's a changed heart that is necessary.

Jesus said you have to be born again. And when you are born the first time, you are born with this wicked, selfish heart. When you are born again, you are born with the nature of God in you.

You still have the old nature to wrestle with, but you are also a partaker of the divine nature. And that divine nature begins to dominate your heart and begins to remove all of that defilement there. As you walk with God, as you walk in His Spirit and He cleans you by the washing of water and by the Word, your heart can be changed.



It's not external things that you need to be cleaned up of. It is internal things, the attitudes and motives of the heart and the values there. Those are the things that defile a man.

Those are the things that God looks at. And those are the things that need to change if we are going to see any improvement in our own lives and in society in general. Well, we'll take this up again next time.