

SUNDAY HANDOUT FOR DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION - August 23

Beneath the Surface (Matthew 15:1-20)

Their faith was a hollow shell - empty and rooted in tradition - and they were leading others astray. In Matthew 15:1-20, the religious leaders put man-made traditions ahead of God's Word, making their rules the foundation of worship and a requirement for purity. Jesus isn't having it. What comes next is not only highly offensive, it's incredibly necessary – as he goes beneath the surface, exposing their hypocrisy and warning us against falling into the same trap.

1. An offensive warning: You can practice all kinds of religious devotion and still have a heart that is far from God. (Matthew 15:1-11)

2. A sobering diagnosis: Your biggest problem isn't external – it's the condition of your heart. (Matthew 15:12-20)

QUESTIONS (Pray, read the passage and pick 4-5 questions to discuss. Trust the Holy Spirit to guide.)

1. Read Matthew 15:1-20. What are the Pharisees and scribes criticizing Jesus and his disciples for? What does Jesus accuse them of doing in verses 3-6? What does this reveal about the danger of putting human tradition - even religious tradition - above God's Word?
2. Look closely at verses 7-9. Jesus calls them "hypocrites" and quotes Isaiah 29:13: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." What is the connection between their outward religious activity and the condition of their hearts? Why can religious activity sometimes make hypocrisy especially difficult to recognize?
3. Jesus says, "In vain do they worship me" (V9). What does this teach us about what God is actually looking for in worship? What are some ways we can look spiritually healthy on the outside while our hearts are drifting from God on the inside?
4. Read verses 10-11, then verses 15-20. Why does Jesus shift the focus from what goes into the mouth to what comes out of the mouth? What do verses 18-19 reveal about the human heart?
5. Jesus gives a sobering diagnosis: the problem is beneath the surface. What are some things that can exist beneath an outwardly "good" Christian life - things like pride, bitterness, fear, lust for control, unforgiveness, or self-deception? Is there anything beneath the surface of your own life that God may be inviting you to bring into the light?
6. Verse 5 describes a religious "loophole" that allowed the Pharisees to avoid obeying God while still feeling religious. Where are we most tempted to do something similar today - to use tradition, preference or even spiritual practices/activity to avoid something God has clearly commanded? What would it look like to surrender that to God?
7. Jesus exposes the problem, but he doesn't leave us without hope. If our deepest problem is the condition of our hearts, why can't we simply try harder or clean up our outward behavior to fix it? How does Jesus ultimately provide what we cannot provide for ourselves? Also consider Psalm 51:10; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Ephesians 2:8-10

Pray: Jesus, take me beneath the surface. Show me where I've substituted religious activity for knowing you, where my heart has grown hard, or where I've hidden behind appearances. I confess that I can't fix myself. Create in me a clean heart. I want to love you with my whole heart, submit to the loving authority of your Word and be transformed by your Spirit.