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 Matt 15:10-20: You Aren't What You Eat  
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**Matthew 15:10-28** <sup>10</sup> And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: <sup>11</sup> not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." <sup>12</sup> Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" <sup>13</sup> He answered, "Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. <sup>14</sup> Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." <sup>15</sup> But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us." <sup>16</sup> And he said, "Are you also still without understanding? <sup>17</sup> Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on? <sup>18</sup> But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. <sup>19</sup> For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. <sup>20</sup> These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

1. Intro:

- a. There is, in almost everyone, a deep-seated urge to rebel.
- b. Example: I've noticed in Sewickley there are hordes, clans even, of teenagers roaming the streets. And many seem to have adopted the punk aesthetic. Like they're trying out for the Ramones or something: The tight jeans. The too-small t-shirt with some band that was big 30 years ago. You know what I mean. The black leather belt studded with metal rivets.
- c. And they live in Sewickley! And I'm thinking, can we please just put the khakis back on and stop pretending? Can we go play tennis?
- d. But that's only one example of this desire to rebel, to reject authority.
  - i. Everybody has someone in their life they're trying not to be. "I'm determined not to be like my mother." Or father. Or family. Or like "those people."
  - ii. The son of the banker that becomes a jazz musician. The daughter of the hippies who becomes a corporate tax attorney.
- e. My point is, there seems to be something in the human heart that wants to rebel, that wants to define itself against something else. There is a desire to assert and construct the self above all other things. There is an element of pride here, of ego, that some might even call sinful. It seems to be one of the built-in flaws in humanity.

2. Segue: We're going to talk about some of these built-in flaws today as we look at Matthew 15. This is the third part of our sermon series, "Jesus in Conversation." Today we see Jesus talking to some religious leaders and his disciples. And in what he says, we see Jesus taking a deep look at

the human heart. He does some serious diagnostic work. And he finds a lot of these built-in flaws.

- a. Matt 15.10-20 is a really radical statement about the source of all human acting out. And I'd like to look at this text and draw out its implications. And we'll talk about why it's unsettling to some people... but ultimately, points us in a very hopeful direction.

### 3. The Passage:

- a. Jesus makes this pithy statement in v. 11:
- b. "not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man"—in other words, you are not what you eat.
- c. Why does he say this? If we go earlier in the chapter, we see this:
  - i. **Matthew 15:1-2** Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup> "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."
- d. Who were the Pharisees?
  - i. Explain the Pharisees: religious leaders who were part of a sect of Judaism where following the rules was a big deal. External religious rules numbered in the 100s—derived from OT Law. And your goodness was measured by your performance.
  - ii. So we can see in this passage that one of their rules concerned washing before meals—if you ate without proper washing, the food you ate would be ritually unclean and you would then also become unclean—or defiled.
  - iii. But this was only one of the things they got upset about. They faulted Jesus for the sinful people he associated with, and for breaking the Sabbath.
  - iv. So Jesus disregarded many of these traditions. And in our passage, his disciples, and presumably Jesus as well, were disregarding this rule about ritual washing before eating.
  - v. When the Pharisees rebuked him for this, his response was the verse we just read:
 

"Hear and understand: <sup>11</sup> not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." (Matt 15:10-11) (5 min)
- e. So the Pharisees get upset:

<sup>12</sup> Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?"

- f. And so Jesus explains what he meant when he said this.

Matt 15:17-20

<sup>17</sup> ...whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on. <sup>18</sup> But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. <sup>19</sup> For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. <sup>20</sup> These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

#### 4. Implications:

##### a. Outside-in approaches to "sin management" don't work

- i. What do I mean by that?
- ii. Well, we're all in church, right? And whether you wanted to come this morning, or you were dragged here against your will, chances are, you basically want to be a good person. The Pharisees wanted to be good people. They tried really hard. Like some of you may be.
- iii. And their approach was an "outside-in" approach. Do these external actions correctly—that will establish your righteousness. Don't let any bad stuff inside you, and you will be safe, you'll be clean.
- iv. Example: the many Christian attempts to try to fill us up with Good Stuff. "Feed the good dog inside you." More scripture reading, more quiet times. Only Christian music. Only Christian movies. No violent movies or salacious books.
- v. But this kind of thinking isn't only in Christianity. The golfer in *Happy Gilmore* reflects this thinking in a New Age way: "You gotta harness in the good energy, block out the bad. Harness energy, block bad."
- vi. The thinking here is that if you prevent any "bad" images or thoughts from getting in to your head, you'll somehow be protected, you'll be a better person. Like the Pharisees said, don't let any bad stuff in you, so you don't get defiled.
- vii. The problem with this is a flawed assumption: the assumption that you exist in some originally pure state, so that you can then be polluted from the outside. There is no originally pure state! (More about that soon)
- viii. But what Jesus says then, is that such approaches are ultimately unsuccessful. They don't have lasting value. As he says that "it's not what goes into a man that defiles him."

- ix. These outside-in approaches don't work. At least, they don't work long-term. You may have some initial success, but ultimately, they don't get you where you want to go.
1. Example: I know people who find it very encouraging to listen to so-called Christian music (which includes Bach, by the way). By all means, do it if it helps—but don't think it will make your deep-seated compulsions go away.
  2. Another Example: Ascetic practices. Rubber band on the wrist: snap for every bad thought. But ultimately, these rarely work either. They don't go deep enough. Training yourself like you would train a dog—negative reinforcement for bad behavior—is not the kind of transformation Christianity offers—and there is nothing distinctly Christian about such approaches.
- x. This is something St. Paul saw, and he wrote about it in his letter to the Colossians (these were Christians):

**Colossians 2:20-23** <sup>20</sup> If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations -- <sup>21</sup> "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" <sup>22</sup> ...according to **human precepts** and teachings? <sup>23</sup> These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting **self-made religion** and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of **no value** in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

**Recap:**

1. **These are human precepts**
  2. **They are self-made religion**
  3. **They are of no value in restraining the flesh**
- xi. So these external attempts, "outside-in," don't work.
1. Some may Object: Phil 4.8 says that we are to "think about" things that are "pure, lovely," etc. Good advice. By all means. But notice, there is nothing in that verse that promises that doing so will change your heart.
- Philippians 4:8** <sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers and sisters,<sup>6</sup> whatever is true, whatever is worthy of respect, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if something is excellent or praiseworthy, think about these things.

**b. Second implication: Sin is mostly an internal problem**

- i. This is the reason that these “outside-in” approaches don’t work: because sin is an internal problem.
- ii. We are hard-wired, it seems, to pursue crooked paths. Our hearts and mind naturally find themselves running down dangerous paths.
- iii. This is what Jesus says: Out of people’s hearts comes all this stuff: (13 min)
  1. Murder: hating other people, the desire for another person to disappear (which is the conscious mind’s way of expressing a subconscious desire for a person to die)
  2. Adultery: failing to honor one’s spouse, to dream about being with someone else.
  3. Fornication: to approach sexuality in a self-centered way, to use it in a way that diminishes the value of commitment and relationship. To see sex as an end in itself. To promote one’s own sexuality as the thing that defines you, so that you eclipse the other gifts God has given you.
  4. Theft: Not only taking what’s not yours, but also related to simply wanting what’s not yours—coveting.
  5. False witness: Misrepresenting the truth—do you portray yourself better than you are? Telling a story in a way that leaves out certain aspects that would make you look bad?
  6. Slander: talking about another person in such a way that you damage their reputation. But even if you don’t talk about them, you essentially slander them in your mind—you know, the people on your street where you think “At least I’m not as bad as them.”
- iv. Article IX of 39 Articles: “...man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit.”
- v. In other words, all this stuff is built in. The desire to do all the things I’ve just mentioned was in you the day you were born. You don’t have to teach your child to lie. Or to act selfishly. You don’t consciously choose to feel jealous, or to become enraged, or to desire things others have, or to conjure up lust, or to desire to control the things around you.
- vi. People are bad—deep down. This is what Joseph Conrad was getting at in *The Heart of Darkness*. That’s why it always bothers me, by the way, when people blame religion—especially Christianity—for wars and brutalities. Humanity was doing these things long before Christianity. These are just things humans do and

we'll use any excuse: religion, atheism, Christianity, communism, nationalism, or whatever.

5. Where this leaves us: in a bad way.
  - a. It would be a lot easier if we could deal with our sin by just washing our hands before we eat, or by these external practices, or by only listening to Christian music. Or if yoga took care of it. Yoga: 18 million people, \$27 billion. But as good as these things are, we find we don't even scratch the surface of our deep predisposition to seek our own good over others, to "follow the devices and desires of our own hearts," as the Anglican confessional prayer goes.
  - b. But if the human heart is just going to continue welling up with these things... well, we're in a fix.
  - c. Why? Because there is a reckoning. There is judgment—that is something that the Pharisees and Jesus had in common—they both believed that ultimately sin is judged. That's why both the Pharisees and Jesus talked about defilement. They both believed people could become defiled.
  - d. We shouldn't be surprised about this idea of judgment. After all, we do it ALL the time. And there is part of us that wants this. We want justice, we want bad things made right.
  - e. But what Jesus was doing with his little saying about what makes someone defiled was correcting the standard by which we are judged. In a sense, he was raising it. I mean, for the Pharisees, their standards involved washing hands the right way before eating. Jesus, however, took the standards to the deepest parts of your psyche, the libidinal urges, the subconscious rage, the unquenchable drive to put yourself above others. Jesus shines the spotlight deep into your soul.
6. Let's close in prayer.
  - a. Just kidding! Imagine if we ended there!
7. We need someone to come from offstage. We need something from outside ourselves. We need some help.
  - a. And to bring this out, I'd like to take a look at a painting.
  - b. *The Calling of Matthew by Caravaggio*
  - c. Matthew is in the midst of his sin. He's a tax-collector—he's a Jew, working for occupying power, Rome, collecting taxes from his own people, to support the oppressor. And he makes a lot of money. And he's a partier—when Jesus meets some of Matthew's friends, the scripture tells us the religious people called Matthew's friends "sinners."

- d. And while he's counting out his money, Jesus shows up, catches him red-handed. And says, "I want you. I pick you." And you can see Matthew's surprise, "Who me?"
8. So if Jesus's teaching about sin leaves you feeling caught red-handed, good. If you are feeling like you need someone to come from outside yourself, good. If you are not able to get the job done on your own, good.
9. There is an answer. There is a solution.
- a. As Bono sang, "You broke the bonds/And you loosed the chains/Carried the cross of my shame/Oh my shame, you know I believe it."
  - b. The cross of Christ is where we go. After all, we are a Christian church. And the cross is the center, the heart. It is what we have to offer.
  - c. You know, I sat in churches for a long time in my life with no idea what the cross meant.
  - d. So let's look at two verses that explain this:
    - i. **2 Cor. 5:1:** God made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we would become the righteousness of God.
    - ii. **Romans 5:6-8:** For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (For rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person perhaps someone might possibly dare to die.) But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
  - e. And what the cross says is that someone else takes the judgment that is yours by right. Jesus takes your every vindictive thought, every murderous impulse, every greedy desire, every cruel or judgmental word, every time you've hurt someone you love, all your idolatrous worship of things that are not God.
  - f. Jesus takes that on his shoulders. Something God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—endeavored to do. For you. For love. Not a lukewarm love. Not a sentimental love. But a deep, powerful, love—a love that sacrificed all for you.
  - g. And God is not suffering from any delusions about your heart. As Jesus shows us in this passage—he sees straight into the darkest rooms of your heart. And he says, "That's mine. I'll take care of that."
  - h. Because he loves you.
  - i. This is unbelievable news.
10. Conclusion: And if that grabs your heart, if forgiveness is something you need...

- a. You just need to do one thing: Nothing. God has done it all. He has taken away your sin, and has forgiven you totally. Your role is simply to receive. To lay down in the bed of forgiveness and mercy that God has prepared. He's turned down the covers, and you just have to lie down. He'll even tuck you in. Give him your burdens, confess your sins, receive his mercy—for the first time or the 101<sup>st</sup> time. Go back to the cross. Go back to the cross.
- b. I'm just going to have a quiet moment for you to express whatever's on your heart to God. Then I'm going to pray. But I'll say this, if this brings up any thoughts or questions, or something's not clear—call me. I'd love to talk to you.