

INTRODUCTION

“The good guys proceed by a feet, but the bad guys overtake them by a yard.” So goes the Chinese saying. Whenever there is a law there will be breakers of the law. When you drive on a highway and pass by the downtown areas in St. Louis or St. Charles you may notice the casinos by the rivers. Do you ever wonder why casinos are only located near the two rivers, but not anywhere else inland in the state? Years ago when someone in Missouri proposed a casino there was opposition from people who feared that the gambling industry might lead to huge social problems like addiction and debt. Eventually, there was a compromise at the legislature that only riverboat casinos were allowed such that those facilities would be restricted in the rivers. At first, the riverboats had to cruise up and down stream every now and then. Customers were only allowed to board the casinos for entertainment at particular time. Later, the regulation that mandated the ships to sail was removed and the casinos could be docked by the rivers permanently. That was the time when sneaky businessmen and lawyers tried to find loophole in the law. The law says a casino has to be in water the whole time and be located 1,000 feet from the shore. Those people designed a casino that is surrounded by an artificial water body like an ancient castle protected by a water trench and they put the building within the required distance from the riverfront, not in the river but on the dryland side. The concept of “boat in a moat” casino was created. No one could challenge that such construction broke the law. This mentality reflects men’s sinful nature. People attempt to outsmart the law to satisfy their selfish desire.

In Matthew 15, Jesus confronted the same mindset the Jewish religious leaders had. Jesus called them hypocrites because they put on a pious guise but they did not have genuine love for God. The story began when a group of Pharisees and teachers of the Law came from Jerusalem to Galilee to see Jesus. They complained to Jesus in [verse 2](#): “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!” The accusation was more than about personal hygiene. Mark filled us in with further details in [Mark 7:3-4](#) – 3 The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles. The religious leaders protested that if someone did not wash his hands in a certain prescribed way then he violated the tradition of the elders. But how on earth did they know whether or not someone washed his hands before meal? A logical guess is that the religious leaders sent informants to snoop on the disciples. Whenever those spies caught an “aha moment” they would report the “wrongdoings” of Jesus and His disciples to the religious authority. In the subsequent context Jesus responded to the allegation of the religious leaders. Jesus pointed out two problems in their hypocrisy. As we study the passage we need to honestly ask ourselves if we are hypocritical just like the religious leaders under certain circumstances. Do we merely participate in religious activities and look spiritual? Deep down inside are our hearts devoted to God? By confronting the religious leaders Jesus showed us that He came to restore a God-centered spirituality.

EXPLANATION

1. 看重傳統但忽略真理 Focus on Men's Tradition but Ignore God's Truth

The first problem of the religious leaders is that they focused on men's tradition but ignored God's truth. What was "the tradition of the elders" Jesus referred to? Those traditions were not written in their Bible. They were a collection of verbal instructions passed along from wise and senior leaders of the community. Those instructions might help people deal with everyday life issues, especially on religious matters. We live by similar traditions in our daily life and we also convey those insights to our next generation. We tell our kids to look both ways before crossing the road. We caution them not to spend the money they don't have in their pocket. But no matter how well-accepted those traditions were they should not override God's command. In **verses 4 to 6** Jesus quoted an example to illustrate how the religious leaders trampled over God's Law: 4 "For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' 5 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' 6 he is not to 'honor his father' with it..." What Jesus cited in verse 4 were clearly God's commands. Most of us can recall that 'Honor your father and mother' is the 5th of the Ten Commandments. As for 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death,' it is stated in the Law of Moses of the Old Testament. Every Jew should know those commands in the Bible. However, the religious leaders made an exception that waived one's obligation to take care of his parents. This tradition is called "Corban." The word means "gifts." A person could make a vow and his dedicate food, money or property to God. However, the tricky part was that it did not necessarily mean that the person had to give the item away immediately. But the vow would prevent other people from using it, and in this case, life subsidy for one's parents. I read from one commentary a bizarre example of a real case of Corban. A man could not invite his father to attend his son's (i.e. the grandson of the elderly parent) wedding because he had dedicated his courtyard as a Corban. To solve the problem he gave away his ownership of the courtyard temporarily to his friend. The land now technically belonged to his friend and so the grandfather was now eligible to step onto the courtyard and celebrate his grandson's wedding. That sounds outrageous but it indeed happened! Jesus was not shy to directly convict the religious leaders of their sins. He said in **verse 3**: "...And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" Then He repeated the same judgment at the end of **verse 6**: "...Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition." This is a very serious allegation to the religious leaders. It is one thing to justify oneself by ignoring God's commands with excuses. It is a more serious sin to teach others not to obey God's commands. Jesus sarcastically commented about the religious leaders in **verse 14**: "...they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." How can a blind man lead another blind man? This is a strong reminder to us, especially for those of us who are in a teaching position. We have the responsibility to lead people to follow God's truth. We are to teach God's Word, not the insights of any gifted leader. Say when you plan to lead a Bible study session or Sunday school class you have to make sure that you are well-prepared. Before you read any reference material you have to spend enough time to study God's Word first. If you are too busy to read the Bible then perhaps you are too busy to be a Bible teacher. I say this seriously. If you just grab a copy of those ready-made study guide and follow question A to Z then you are being irresponsible. I am not saying that you cannot read any reference material. But that comes after you have read the Bible thoroughly. Even when you consult a commentary or similar material you have to be careful. Nowadays there are tons of

Bible resources on the internet. What may sound right is not necessarily right. You have to check how the author came to his conclusion. Did he cross reference to supportive Bible verses or other reliable authors? I am not saying that you have to be a Bible scholar before you can lead Bible study or teach Sunday school. But I hope that the burden of responsibility to teach others God's truth helps you rethink the importance of your role. When I was first trained to preach on Sunday 16 years ago it took me about 50 hours to write a sermon. Most of the time was spent on nothing else but reading the Bible passage. Now the process may be cut down to 30 hours. The reward of going deeper into God's Word is well worth the effort. More than likely what I actually put into a sermon may only be a portion of what I learned through my study.

Going back to the problem of focusing on men's tradition while ignoring God's truth. Can we possibly commit the same mistake? It happens when we deliberately neglect what the Bible says and justify our disobedience that all we did was for God. God gives a man the obligation to take care of his family. But some brothers may be too busy serving in church ministries while forsaking their families. Or perhaps a husband is very generous to make a substantial offering to the church while being stingy to the needs of his own family. The wife dares not to utter a word of complaint because her husband is "doing all that for the Lord." For issues like those there may not be an absolute yes or no answer. Both spouses have to come to a consensus after candid discussion and prayer. When it comes to church ministries sometimes we may resort to men's tradition. For example, a recurring and debatable topic is whether we should only sing classical or contemporary hymns in worship. If people insist it one way over the other then they may be following men's rules. Some churches even forbid the use of musical instrument because it is not mentioned in the New Testament. If one has to make a case based on what the Bible does not say then there are many things we should not do – we should not even use electricity or any modern technology!

2. 看重外表但忽略内心 Focus on the Look but Ignore the Heart

Jesus came to restore a God-centered spirituality. Jesus revealed the problem of the religious leaders because they put their focus on men's tradition but they ignored God's truth. Their second problem was putting their focus on one's look but ignore his heart. Jesus convicted the religious leaders in **verses 7 to 9** this way: 7 "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 8 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'" In the gospels Jesus often rebuked the religious leaders as "hypocrites." The term finds its background in drama performance in the ancient times where actors switched masks when they played different roles on the stage. The religious leaders put on a mask of piety when they were in public. Their teaching and leadership were like performing a religious show. That was why Jesus quoted the words of the prophet Isaiah to criticize them. Just like the people in Isaiah's days these religious leaders worshiped God with their rituals but they did not worship God with their hearts. Those teachers might look good on the outside, but God knew their hearts. I cannot emphasize strong enough that God has a high expectation for teachers. **Hebrews 13:7** reads - Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. It is easy for a Bible teacher to act spiritual – say the right Biblical catchphrases, and lead a Bible study or preach a sermon just like presenting a scholarly research. Just like the author of the Hebrews suggested, we need to examine what kind of person a teacher is when he

steps out of a classroom or descends from the pulpit. It is a solemn warning to me. How do brothers and sisters see me when I am not teaching God's Word? Even if I can fool you I cannot trick my wife and my kids. A few days ago my family was eating dinner at home. Just like usual my older son finished earlier than the rest of us. He carried his drink back to his room when the container slipped and dropped to the floor. The three of us were still at the dining room, and we heard the sound of something hitting the floor. Without missing a beat my younger son slammed the table gently and responded: "Aiya! What is wrong with you?" Of course we all laughed about it. But immediately I thought: "Goodness! Am I that kind of person in my kids' mind who shows no grace at their unintentional mistakes but cannot wait to scold them? Do I care more about how they act on the outside or whether they love God on the inside?"

Going back to the passage. Remember at the beginning of the chapter when the religious leaders accused Jesus' disciples of not following their tradition to wash hands before meals? Jesus did not address the matter until the second half of the passage. He commented in [verse 11](#): "What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'" Jesus then elaborated that once food was ingested it would eventually end up in the bathroom. Therefore, what came into one's mouth would not defile a person. Rather, it was what came out from one's mouth that defiled a person. Jesus then explained in [verses 19 and 20](#): "19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. 20 These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'" Jesus concluded that it was the sins inside one's heart that defiled a person. The six sins Jesus listed in verse 19 are just samples of all the sins that a person can commit. Every sin originates from the heart. An unrestrained sinful desire would lead to sinful acts. Hatred would lead to murder; coveting of another person's spouse would result in adultery, and so forth. But the religious leaders put their focus only on how to preserving their cleanness on the outside instead of their cleanness on the inside. In Matthew 25 Jesus used even harsher words to reprove the religious leaders of their seven "woes." Let us look at two of them. Jesus said in [Matthew 23:25](#) that: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." What is the point of washing the outside of a cup or dish while ignoring the dirt and germs on the inside? Then skip down to [verses 27 and 28](#): "27 Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." An elegant tombstone that looks good on the outside cannot conceal the fact that there are bones buried on the inside of the grave. Sometimes we may evaluate a person based on his capability while overlooking his character. Just recently someone commented about another brother by saying: "I don't think he is a bad person because he offers quite a lot of money to the church." See the fallacy there? God never assesses us based on what we can do, after all every gift and talent is from Him. He cares more about what kind of person we are in our hearts. Godly virtues like gentleness, humility and perseverance are not something we are easily see from a person unless we get to know him better. Judging others based on the look can easily lead our pride. We feel that that we are superior to others because we know the Bible more, more eager to help the needy or serve in more ministries. On the flip side, it can also cause insecurity in us. We are in constant fear that we have not done enough to please God. When calamity hits us we wonder if God is punishing us because we do not have regular

devotion or steady meeting attendance, or we offer too little money to the church. We erroneously believe that God to love us more if we have a better performance.

CONCLUSION

Jesus came to restore a God-centered spirituality. He challenged the man-centered religion the religious leaders tried to preserve. But that is not what God asks for! Men's traditions may eventually fade away, new tradition may be added in the future. However, God's truth stands forever, and it is applicable to any culture. Men's standard to evaluate a person based on outward criteria may change. God's eternal standard that examines our hearts remains the same.