

# WHAT LIES BENEATH

GOING DEEPER  
DISCUSSION GUIDE  
March 16, 2014



# Discussion Guide

## What lies beneath

*Matthew 15.1-20*

### Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

### Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Have you ever had a habit you wanted to break? Would you describe what steps you took to break that habit? What was this experience like for you?

### Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Use the notes to explain the context and background of Matthew 15.1-20.
- Read Matthew 15.1-20 aloud, slowly. Seek to use your imagination to “watch” the scene unfold as if you were present.

- As you watch the scene, what approaches to pleasing God and dealing with the realities of our lives that do not please God are discussed?
- To which of these approaches do people seem to gravitate most often? What forms does this approach take today?
- To which of these approaches do you gravitate most often? What does this look like in your own life? Why might you gravitate to this approach more than any other?
- What problems does Jesus outline for those who adhere to a “rules-based” approach to pleasing God? Can you think of any others?
- Do you consider Jesus’ “heart-based” approach to pleasing God to be an acceptable alternative to the “rules-based” approach of the Pharisees? Does Jesus’ approach seem to be easier or more difficult to you? Would you elaborate?
- What might the pursuit of a life pleasing to God using Jesus’ “heart-based” approach look like? What might keep people from approaching life in this manner?
- Read Proverbs 4.23 aloud twice, slowly. Listen to what God is saying to you in these words. What steps might he be inviting you to take as an individual? As a group?

### Context and Background

#### *Tradition of the Elders*

In Matthew 15, Jesus entered into a controversy with the Pharisees over the value and authority of the “tradition of the elders.” The tradition of the elders was an oral tradition comprised of the moral guidelines followed by the Pharisees,

guidelines which exceeded the standards of the Mosaic Law with regard to tithes and ritual purity. This oral tradition emerged out of the experience of the exile. Many within the Jewish sect of the Pharisees believed that the Jewish exile had occurred because the Jewish people had not held to the Law of Moses, an idea rooted within the Law itself (Deuteronomy 29.19-29). The movement that became the Pharisees emerged, in part, as an attempt to rectify the failure of the Jewish people to keep the Law by making the Law understandable and applicable for the average person. Rabbis began to teach their followers how to live out the commandments of the Law of Moses. Over time, the teachings of these rabbis, sometimes called the elders, was codified orally and passed down from one rabbi to the next. Eventually, these oral traditions surpassed the literal teachings of Scripture in emphasis, something Jesus debated.

The Pharisees did not expect that all people would follow their oral traditions, but they did believe that their traditions were correct. This raises the question as to why the Pharisees repeatedly challenged Jesus with his failure to adhere to their traditions (Matthew 12.2; 15.2). More than likely, the Pharisees understood Jesus to be within their religious movement because many of his teachings were identical to theirs, and he emphasized helping the common person follow God, which they too emphasized. Jesus assembled a group of followers, much like rabbis of the Pharisees. In many respects, Jesus looked like a Pharisee to his peers. If this was their interpretation of Jesus, it is not hard to understand why the Pharisees would therefore challenge Jesus on the points where he departed from them in religious practice.

## **The Text**

### **Matthew 15.1-9:**

#### ***The approach of sin management***

In Matthew 15, Jesus is challenged by a group of Pharisees because of his failure to adhere to the oral tradition of the Pharisees. This challenge comes on the heels of Jesus' feeding of the 5,000

on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. News of this miraculous feeding appears to have reached Jerusalem and a group of Pharisees from Jerusalem embark on a journey to find Jesus. When they find Jesus, they accuse him of breaking the tradition of the elders, the oral moral code of the Pharisees, because they have heard that Jesus allows people to eat without washing their hands. (See Tradition of the Elders.) Obviously the Pharisees are bewildered that Jesus would feed people but not require them to wash up first! The concern with washing does not involve hygiene, but rather it is a concern involving ritual purity.

The Pharisees were very concerned about remaining ritually pure before God. Ritual cleanness meant that one was able to stand before God. Ritual uncleanness was not a problem but was a normal experience of life. However, when a person was ritually unclean, he was to take steps to become clean. The failure or refusal to take these steps could defile others. Hands were important to the ancient Jews as they represented the actions of a person. If a man's hands were unclean, then what he did could contaminate others (Leviticus 15.11). While the Law of Moses simply stated that one's hands could become unclean, the Pharisees interpreted the Law to state that a person's hands were by nature unclean unless washed. The root of this idea is somewhat mysterious but it may come from the requirement of priests to wash before entering the Tabernacle (Exodus 30.18-21). The concern of the Pharisees in this particular instance seems to involve the risk of people sharing a meal with contaminated hands. The result could be that people would dirty one another. The charge is thus, "Jesus, you are running the risk of making people dirty before God!" However, the real concern of the Pharisees was in living before God in a pleasing manner. They did not want to do anything that would displease God or be contrary to what God desired. This was the motivation standing behind the oral tradition. Thus, the oral tradition was a compilation of oral laws aimed to help people keep the Law of Moses.

It was a means of avoiding sin. One might call this desire the desire to manage sin. The Pharisees believed that sin could be avoided if they had the right rules.

Jesus counters the challenge of the Pharisees by arguing that the attempts to manage sin with rules only lead the Pharisees to the thing they are seeking to avoid: sin. Jesus picks out one of the Ten Commandments as an example (Exodus 20.12). He argues that God commanded people to honor their parents, but the oral tradition of the Pharisees made it possible—even likely!—that the Pharisees would dishonor their parents. The tradition Jesus highlights is a tradition called Corban. This tradition allowed for a man to commit a portion of his belongings to God, to be delivered to the Temple upon his death. However, the possessions remained under his control until that point. According to the tradition, he could use them but he could not share them. Thus, if his parents were in need, he could not give to them because he had already given his wealth to God. Jesus labels this as pretending to be holy (hypocrisy). He notes that this is honoring God externally but keeping one's true self separated from God (Isaiah 29.13). Basically, Jesus states that the attempt to manage sin with rules was pointless.

### **Matthew 15.10-20:**

#### ***The approach of heart purification***

Jesus expands upon his dismissal of the oral tradition of the Pharisees by demonstrating its logical fallacies. What a person eats cannot defile him because it is expelled. It does not remain within a person. What is more defiling is what is already inside a person and comes out. This offends the Pharisees because it amounts to a full dismissal of their purity code at its root; that is, Jesus claims one cannot avoid sin through a set of rules. Jesus is not disturbed but

remarks that those who attempt to approach God like the Pharisees are blind. Peter asks for clarification and is lightly rebuked. Even the Pharisees understand what Jesus is saying! Jesus meets Peter where he is and explains that what truly defiles is what comes out of the heart. Thus, to be pure requires a radical reorientation of the heart.

### **Application:**

How does a person deal with sin? It is obvious that sin is a problem. The million dollar question is: How does a person deal with the problem? The typical answer is, "Make a rule!" Often, we respond to the presence of sin in our lives by creating rules that will keep us from breaking God's rules. When our rules do not work, we create rules that enable us to keep the rules we cannot keep. We create layers and layers of rules in an effort to insulate ourselves from the sin we so desperately seek to avoid. We think we are safe, but we are not. Rules cannot keep us from sin. Rules only hinder sin in one area, but it pops out in another. The only way to deal with sin is to eradicate it at its source, our heart. Rules are helpful insofar as they can point out the presence of sin (Romans 7), but it is in opening our heart to God's transforming grace that we are actually delivered from that which plagues us.

Want to know how this looks in real life? Check out Blake's blog at [BlakeShipp.blogspot.com](http://BlakeShipp.blogspot.com)



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