**LEARNING WHICH > WHAT**

**(Matthew 15:1-20)**

My dad was a conservative man. When I was growing up, his conservatism was on display whenever he gave me an allowance. The allowance was not weekly; it was monthly, I think. It always seemed like eons between allowances. As a child, I remember reading the back of the Kellogg cereal box and seeing that there was going to be a drawing. Whoever’s name was drawn would receive $5-week allowance. K-ching! K-ching! I couldn’t imagine such a windfall. By comparison, I was just getting $2 to $3 a month. I would day-dream about what I could do with $5 a week. My name was never drawn.

Let me tell you about Junior who was still a preschooler when his dad decided he would start giving Junior a modest allowance. It’s always good to have leverage to make sure a child will clean his room and help out around the house.

One day Dad explained to Junior about the idea of an allowance and how it would work and what would be expected of him. Then, he gave Junior a shiny presidential one-dollar coin. Junior was so proud of his $1 coin. He went outside, sat down on the steps of the front porch, and examined the coin he was holding.

A neighborhood kid walked up and asked Junior what he had. Junior showed him. The kid reached into his pocket and pulled out two quarters. The kid said, “I’ll trade you these two quarters for that one coin. Two is better than one.” Junior thought about that a moment. “Two is more than one,” he concluded; so, he made the trade.

Moments later, another neighborhood boy came by and asked Junior what he had. Junior showed him the two quarters. The boy reached into his pocket and pulled out three dimes. He said, “I’ll trade you. Three is better than two.” Junior agreed and made the trade.

Then, another neighborhood boy walked up and asked Junior what he was holding. Junior showed him his three dimes. That boy reached into his pocket and counted out four nickels. He said, “Four is better than three.” Junior made the trade.

Wouldn’t you know it? Another kid came by and asked Junior what he had in his hands. Junior showed off his four shiny nickels. The boy dug deep into his front pocket and found five pennies. Five is more than four. He made the trade.

Junior got up, walked back inside, and showed his Dad how he had turned one coin into five. The Dad didn’t want to discourage his son; so, he just said, “Wow!” Dad happened to be a coin collector. He said, “Junior, let me see those pennies.” Four of them were shiny. He laid them aside. He took a closer look at the one that had been dulled by time.

He said, “Son, this here is a 1944 wheat penny. It’s worth a least $3 or $4, maybe more. You did well. Hold on to this one. Don’t trade it, and don’t spend it. Good job!”

Junior beamed.

One of the greatest lessons in life to learn is what things are more important and of greater value than other things. Not everything is of equal importance. Some things are greater than, and some things are less than.

The title of today’s message is “Learning Which Is Greater Than What.” Our text is Matthew 15:1-20. In this passage, Jesus gives us insight regarding the fact that some things are more important than other things. We learn that a delegation of Pharisees and Scribes from Jerusalem have come to question Jesus. Their goal is not to learn from Jesus. They want to demonstrate publicly that Jesus isn’t doing things the right way. Their question is really more of a criticism and an accusation. Jesus feels no compulsion to answer it or to defend Himself. Instead, He brings a counter-charge against the religious elite. Based on what Jesus says, we begin to learn what things are of greater value.

Let’s read our text.

1. **GOD’S COMMANDS ARE GREATER THAN OUR TRADITIONS.**

This delegation of Pharisees and scribes have traveled north from Jerusalem all the way to Galilee. I think they must have been tipped off by the religious leaders in the north that this Jesus is causing problems. Back in Matthew 12:14 we read, “But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, how to destroy Him.” Those were local Pharisees. I have the suspicion that they brought in some hired guns.

To change the analogy, the heavy weights take a swing at Jesus. He sidesteps their clumsy attempt, and verbally lands a quick jab of His own catching them flush on the nose.

Their complaint is that Jesus’ closest followers are not playing by their rules. This matter of hand-washing had nothing to do with practicing good hygienic habits. The germ theory was still centuries away. The religious leaders had ruled that every good Jew was to wash ceremoniously before every meal.

The hand-washing ceremony involved pouring a small amount of water over the hands while the fingers are pointing upward. That was then repeated with the fingers pointing downward. Then, one would dry each hand by rubbing the fist of the other hand over it. Thus, they would be cleansed from the “cooties,” so to speak, of Gentiles and other sinners.

Jesus didn’t enforce this practice because it was not found in Scripture. It was a man-made rule, and Jesus wasn’t playing their games.

Jesus shot back. Look at v. 3. Jesus claims that these religious rulers have elevated their traditions over the commands of God. In fact, they follow their traditions and use them as a way to get around His commands.

He gives a case in point. Look at vv. 4-6. Jesus teaches that honoring your parents involves providing for them as they get older. Jesus claims that there are those, however, who tell their parents, “I had set aside a sum of money to use to take care of you, but then I vowed to give that money to God. Since I can’t invalidate the vow I made to God, I just don’t have the money to take care of you. Sorry!”

Jesus thunders, “You are using your tradition to violate what the word of God clearly teaches. Shame on you!”

Do we ever elevate tradition over the clear teaching of Scripture? I would suggest that if we don’t elevate it, we at least put our tradition on par with Scripture far more than we realize.

Most of what we do in church we do because of tradition, not because it is required by Scripture. Like most churches, we have a worship service on Sunday mornings at 11:00. Why do we do that? Is there some verse in the Bible that tells us to do that? No. We do it because of tradition. Somewhere centuries ago, farmers needed time to milk the cows and do their chores on Sunday morning; so, worship was set for 11:00 to accommodate their schedule.

Many evangelical believers say we need to be a NT church. Okay. If we are going to be a NT church, we need to get rid of the piano, and the pulpit, and the choir loft, and the pews, and the stained-glass windows, and the hymnals, and the steeple, and the central heat and air, and the indoor plumbing. In fact, we need to get rid of the whole church building. I would say, you need to give up your printed, English Bible, but I really don’t want to require that. Now, who is going to host us in your home because to really be a NT church we must meet in someone’s home?

Very little of what we do on Sunday morning is done because the Bible tells us to do it. What we do is borne out of tradition. But you would not be in favor if I suggested the invitation is unnecessary or that we can do away with Sunday School.

I once read of a pastor who said, “If 1954 ever rolls around again, my church is going to be ready.” Well, the fact is that 1954 isn’t coming back, nor is 1964 nor 1974, nor 1984, nor 1994, nor even 2004.

Reggie McNeal wrote an insightful book called *The Present Future.* For some folks it was a real downer and for others it was a real wake-up call. The first chapter of his book deals with what he calls “the collapse of the church culture.”

Listen to what he wrote on page 1.

The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out . . . or when the remaining . . . generation of institutional loyalists die off or both.

Please don’t hear what I am not saying. The death of the church culture as we know it will not be the death of the church . . . The church established by Jesus will survive until He returns. The imminent demise under discussion is the collapse of the unique culture in North America that has come to be called “church.” The church culture has become confused with biblical Christianity, both inside the church and out. In reality, the church culture in North America is a vestige of the original movement, an institutional expression of religion that is in part a civil religion and in part a club where religious people can hang out with other people whose politics, worldview, and lifestyle match theirs. As He hung on the cross Jesus probably never thought the impact of His sacrifice would be reduced to an invitation for people to join and to support an institution.

In other words, Jesus didn’t die on the cross so you can come to church on Sunday morning and hang out with your church friends. That’s not the point of the Christian faith. We can continue to follow our traditions without ever interacting with this Book and fulfilling God’s call upon our lives.

Isn’t that what was going on with the Pharisees and the religious elite of Jesus’ day. They had this highly developed religious system, but they weren’t being the people of God.

God’s commands are greater than our traditions. We would be far more effective in promoting His Kingdom if we took seriously what we call the Great Commission. In that commission, Jesus did not say, “Go into all the world and get people to join you in perpetuating your traditions.” No, He said, “Go into all the world and make disciples . . . teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you,” not all the traditions that you have developed.

God’s commands are greater than our traditions.

1. **GOD’S HONOR IS GREATER THAN OUR IMAGE.**

You could say that Jesus had a “come to Jesus” meeting with that delegation who came to see Him. Look at what He says to them in v. 7. Jesus doesn’t mince words. He says, “You hypocrites!” Of the 17 times that word is used in the NT, 13 of those occurrences show up in the Gospel of Matthew, and each time, that word comes from the lips of Jesus. By the way, that word was first used of actors who were playing a role. They would hold up a mask in front of their face as the delivered their lines. In time the word came to describe a person who was just pretending to be something he really wasn’t.

Jesus didn’t soft-pedal His message. He didn’t say, “Well, I think there are some important things you may have over-looked.” No, Jesus tells it like it is.

Then, in vv. 8-9 He quotes what Isaiah wrote and applies it to the men who are standing before Him. Basically, He told them, “Your hearts are far from God, and your worship is completely useless because you are more interested in teaching people to follow you than you are in urging them to follow God.”

Look at what the disciples ask Jesus in v. 12. Imagine that! The Pharisees were offended when Jesus told it like it really was. Maybe the disciples are telling Jesus, “You don’t want to upset these guys. If you can get them on your side, they could really open some doors for you.”

We need to draw a distinction between three things: self-image, image (or reputation), and character. Your self-image is how you view yourself. What are the words you use to describe yourself? That is your self-image.

Image or reputation is how others view you. What kind of words do other people use to describe you? Most people want to polish their image. They want people to speak and think well of them. They want to have a strong and good reputation. Many celebrities hire professional image consultants. They pay them handsomely to improve their status in the eyes of the public.

Self-image is who you think you are. Image or reputation is who other people think you are. Character is who you really are. Which one do you think God is most interested in making better?

To hear some popular preachers, you would think God really wants you to improve your self-image, that God really wants you to like yourself.

I think God is far more interested in improving your character. One quality of good character is that you tell the truth. You tell it like it is.

Let me say, there is a difference between being offensive and being intentionally offensive. People will likely be offended when we speak the truth, but we should never speak to people with the goal of offending them.

You might say, “Well, Jesus called those Pharisees and scribes a name. He called them hypocrites.” In our culture, if you call a person a hypocrite, to be sure, he or she is going to be offended. No one wants to be called a hypocrite.

I am not sure that in Jesus’ day that word had such a negative connotation. It was used to describe an actor who was playing a role. An actor would not be offended if you called him an actor. That’s what he is.

I can imagine Jesus shaking his head and saying, “You guys are just playing a role. You are playing pretend. You are actors.”

Our job is not to go out and purposely offend people. We are to tell the truth. The truth is offensive enough.

Look at 2 Corinthians 2:14-16. If we go out and just tell the truth, the audience will determine whether or not they are offended. When we tell the truth, those who are believers will say, “High-five brother! Right on!” When we tell the truth, those who are unbelievers will say, “I’m going to sue you! How dare you say such things! I’m offended!”

We have a saying, “The truth hurts,” and it does. It hurts the fragile feelings of those who are opposed to the truth.

I heard about the daughter of a pastor who was asked to give the closing prayer at her high school graduation. A Jewish student was asked to give the opening prayer. The principal asked the pastor’s daughter if she would refrain from using the name of Christ in her prayer, “lest someone of other faiths be offended.” She said she would be glad to omit Christ’s name from her closing prayer if the Jewish student would mention Christ’s name in his opening prayer, “so that I and those of my faith not be offended.” She was allowed to give her prayer as originally planned.

God is a God of truth. When we tell the truth, we honor Him. Honoring Him is far more important than attempting to honor ourselves. God’s honor is greater than our image.

We are looking at which is greater than what. So far, we have seen that God’s commands are greater than our traditions, and God’s honor is greater than our image.

1. **THE INSIDE IS GREATER THAN THE OUTSIDE.**

In this passage we see that a delegation from Jerusalem come to Jesus and makes a charge. Jesus doesn’t answer their accusation; He makes one against them: “You use your traditions to set aside and get around God’s commands.” Then, in v. 10 Jesus speaks above the heads of the delegation to the other people who are there.

Jesus says, “Listen. Catch this. This is important. You are not defiled by what you eat. You are defiled by what you say and do.”

Apparently, the delegation has had enough. They walk away in a huff. That’s when the disciple’s say, “Jesus, you offended them.”

Jesus proceeds to teach the disciples and those who were there and had been listening in. First, He talks about the religious leaders. Basically, He says, “These guys are a bunch of weeds in God’s field, but God didn’t plant them, and one day they are going to be uprooted.” He added, “These guys are blind guides. If you let them guide you, they are going to walk you right off the path and into a deep ditch.”

Peter, who acts as a spokesman for the disciples says, “Back up. What did you mean when you talked about what goes in the mouth and what goes out of the mouth? Go over that again.”

I think Jesus just might have rolled His eyes and shook His head. Look again at vv. 17-20. Jesus is saying, these religious leaders have gotten it wrong. They say that what really matter is the physical. They are concerned with what you put in our mouth, with what you do with your hands. They are all about the external. They’ve gotten it wrong. What matters is the internal.”

Jesus is saying, “The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.” What makes you unacceptable to God is not what you put in your mouth; it is what comes out of your heart and out of your mouth.”

In Matthew 12:34, Jesus said, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”

Jesus taught that whatever you eat goes through the digestive tract and is expelled. According to Mark’s account of this story, by saying what He did, Jesus was claiming that all foods are clean. In other words, a ham sandwich isn’t going to defile you. It will just go in, down, and out.

It is not the physical; it is the spiritual that matters. The problem is what is in the heart because whatever is in the heart, that is what will come out.

It was April 20, 1999, when Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 12 students and 1 teacher and injured 24 others before taking their own lives at Columbine High School in Colorado. Oprah Winfrey’s *O* magazine featured an article by Dylan’s mother, Susan Klebold, ten years after that terrible in which she offered her perspective on what happened.

She wrote how she was perceived as an accomplice to the killings because she had raised a “monster.” In a newspaper survey taken just after the shootings, 83 percent of the respondents believed the killings happened because Dylan and Eric’s parents did not teach them proper values.

“Dylan was a product of my life’s work,” Susan wrote, “but his final actions implied that he had never been taught the fundamentals of right and wrong. There was no way to atone for my son’s behavior.” She added:

In raising Dylan, I taught him how to protect himself from a host of dangers: lightning, snake bites, head injuries, skin cancer, smoking, drinking, sexually transmitted diseases, drug addiction, reckless driving, even carbon monoxide poisoning. It never occurred to me that the gravest danger—to him, and as it turned out, to many others—might come from within.

The Devil, to be sure, is an enemy. The temptations of this world are certainly dangerous. Keeping bad company is a real danger. The greatest danger is within your own heart. You are your own worst enemy. That is why we need Jesus. When we turn from our sin and ask Him to become our Lord, He enters in and begins a work of transformation. He does for us what we can’t do for ourselves.

Someone in our church has a sticker on the back of their vehicle that uses the greater than sign. The sticker says, HE>I. That is the message of this message. Jesus is greater than me; He is greater than you. Turn to Him. Let Him become your Savior and your Teacher.