

“Sola Scriptura”
Matthew 15:1-20
September 23, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

One of the defining words of the Protestant Reformation was the little Latin word *sola*. It means “alone” and was paired with Scripture, faith, grace and Christ in the central doctrines of the Reformation. The distinctive contribution of the Reformation was to recover the importance of that little word. To state that differently, the error the Church had fallen into prior to Luther’s reformation was not to renounce those four crucial parts of our faith, but to allow other things to come alongside them.

When we allow something to be added to any of these four, it is a fatal error. We can see that clearly with the doctrine of “Christ alone.” To believe that salvation comes through Christ plus anything renders Jesus of no use to us. It would be like a child taking a sharpie to da Vinci’s Mona Lisa masterpiece in an attempt to improve it some. The addition, instead of improving it, would be its ruin.

While it is easy to see the necessity of Christ alone, and the damage done when this *sola* is lost, it is perhaps not so easy to see the damage done when we leave the *sola* out of *sola Scriptura*. There are two enemies of Scripture alone highlighted in this passage: traditionalism and superficiality. The Bible is strong medicine for sin-sick souls (Heb. 4:12). This passage describes two ways we rob this medicine of its power.

I. Traditionalism – v. 1-9

Jerusalem’s religious leaders come to Jesus and ask him why his disciples break the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before eating. It was customary in Jesus’ day to hold the teacher responsible for the behavior of his disciples, and that’s why they come to Jesus with their questions. Their concern about handwashing was not prompted by a concern for personal hygiene, but from a zeal for God’s law. The Old Testament is filled with laws about the ritual washings required of the priests, but it said nothing about washings for the laity. After the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, Israel’s religious leaders became zealous to make sure Israel never went into captivity again because of their sin. So they began adding requirements just to make sure they never broke God’s law. They reasoned that if washing was good for the priests, then why not require it of everyone in order that all of Israel might remain ritually clean?

They wrote many of these laws down in a work known as the *Mishnah*. In its English translation, the *Mishnah* includes about four thousand words on how to wash correctly. It addresses such issues as whether or not the washing should extend up to the wrists or over the wrists, how much water should be used and from what sources and what kind of vessels the water should come from. If the Jewish leaders were concerned about such details, then they must have been completely scandalized by the complete lack of washing performed by Jesus' disciples, and they demand an explanation.

Jesus answers their question with one of his own. **“Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?”** He goes on to explain a practice they were engaging in that had the effect of nullifying the fifth commandment, to honor one's father and mother. Throughout most of human history, the principal method of caring for the elderly was for their children to care for them. That is a part of what is in view with the fifth commandment. To care for those too old to work is neither easy nor cheap. So if a parent asked a child to help and the child didn't want to help, there was a practice their tradition had developed that would allow the child to avoid this costly obligation. The child only needed to pronounce the word “Corban” over the money or goods in question. That is a Hebrew word that means “Dedicated to God.” Since it was dedicated to God, the reasoning goes, and since one's obligation to God takes precedence over an obligation to one's parents, it would be wrong to give the money to parents. Conveniently for the child, though, there was no obligation to give the money immediately to God. It could be given even years later, used by the child until then. It was also not without significance that the ones making this rule, the religious leaders, would benefit when the money was given. So the effect was that needy parents went uncared for while the powerful and young were enriched.

How is this an answer to the question of the scribes and Pharisees? It puts human traditions in their proper place below the authority of the Bible. It needs to be said here that there is an important distinction between traditions and traditionalism. Someone has put it this way: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” Our church has many traditions that are good things. It is our tradition to meet for public corporate worship on Sunday mornings each week. It is our tradition to employ a blend of contemporary and traditional music, to preach 30 minute sermons, during which the congregation sits and the preacher stands. The error Jesus is pointing out is when we allow those traditions to rise to the level of Scripture. I have encountered people who claim that the singing of traditional hymns is improper in today's American church, and I have encountered those claiming that the failure to sing traditional hymns is sinful. When we make such claims, we have fallen prey to traditionalism. Because these are the traditions of men rather than the word of God, complete and unqualified adherence to them can bring unintended and harmful consequences, like the use of the tradition of Corban in this passage.

This suggests three applications. First, let's always remember to maintain this important distinction between human traditions and the Word of God, giving complete and unqualified adherence only to God's word. Steve Brown once humorously said that Presbyterians have to be careful about the way they do something the first time, because they'll be doing it that way for the next 200 years. We had a humorous illustration of this at our God's House Board meeting this week. It had been our tradition as a church for the last thirty years or so to have an annual appreciation banquet for the God's House teachers. Some ladies in the church had a heart to honor these teachers, and they went all out in making this a special time. So I was asking at the board meeting if someone was willing to take responsibility for that this year. It seems that it slipped between the cracks last year and didn't get done. After I made that request, the Director of God's House spoke up to tell us that they were actually glad that it slipped through the cracks last year. Apparently, the banquet has been a burden for them for several years. Out of consideration for the church, and thinking that it was an important tradition for us to keep up, they hadn't said anything about it. So the application is never to let a church tradition become equal to God's word. To do so brings harm to the church, just as the tradition of Corban here brought harm to parents.

A second and third application stem from Jesus' quote of Isaiah 29. **"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."** Isaiah writes against the hypocritical practice of honoring God outwardly while failing to do so in the heart. We honor God in the heart by receiving his word for what it is, believing it and surrendering ourselves to it. I've been reading lately the story of George Vanderbilt, the man who built Biltmore house in Asheville, North Carolina. A village rose up near his house to accommodate the thousands of workers required for that project, and Vanderbilt wanted them to have a church to attend. So he paid to have one built, and it was known then and continues to be known as the Cathedral of All Souls Episcopal Church. The building was designed by the same man who served as architect for the Biltmore House, Richard Morris Hunt. As soon as the church was built, the Rector realized he had a problem on his hands. The church would fill up with tourists who wanted to see the church built by George Vanderbilt, while having no real interest in following Christ. Pretending to worship, their real interests were only to see a building. Such impure motives still plague the church.

Another application stems from the Isaiah 29 quote. Note that this is speaking of a worship practice. We normally think of worship as what we give to God in offering him our praises, ourselves and our money. This looks at worship from the other side—what God gives to us. What God gives to us in worship is his word, preached each Lord's Day by the one called of God to do so. So this verse places on the preacher the obligation of being true to God's word by not teaching as truth mere commandments of men. Here's the

application I have in mind with this: value expository preaching. This is the kind of preaching that makes its goal the explanation and application of a specific passage of Scripture. It is contrasted with topical sermons that are oriented around a topic rather than a passage of Scripture. If I as a preacher simply gave you my thoughts on particular topics of importance, throwing in some Bible passages here and there, I would inevitably be teaching the commandments of men.

II. Superficiality – v. 10-20

This section speaks of our need to allow God’s word to penetrate deeply into our lives, all the way to the heart. The error Jesus’ opponents were making was to be overly concerned with external cleansing and under-concerned with cleansing of the greater defilement of the heart. Jesus begins by making an incredibly controversial statement. **“It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person”** (v. 11). It is not at all surprising to read that the Pharisees were offended by this. After all, by saying this Jesus is changing a large part of the Old Testament, every section of it that addresses the distinction between clean and unclean food. Frederick Bruner points out the striking nature of this.

Jesus just gave the principle (15:1-9) that Scripture rules as Queen in the church. But no sooner do we take this principle to heart than we hear Jesus seeming to cut out a whole section of that Scripture. This must mean that it is Jesus’ interpretation of Scripture—Jesus’ tradition!—that has the final word in Scripture and so in the church (p. 92).

Jesus tells his disciples not to get into a fight with their opponents over such things. “Leave them alone,” he says, reminding them that God himself will judge those who lead others astray through false doctrine. In a striking metaphor, he speaks of “blind guides.” Can you imagine such a thing? Blind people definitely need guides, but what do we think when a blind person comes forward offering to be a guide? Presumably, this blind, would-be guide thinks he can see. The result is predictable as the two of them walk confidently right into a pit. There is no shortage of blind guides these days, people who have an abundance of confidence but little light because they are not submitting to God’s word.

Peter didn’t understand what Jesus meant when he said that a person is defiled by what comes out of the mouth rather than what goes in, so he asks Jesus about it. Jesus gets a little graphic in his response, speaking explicitly about the digestive process. It ends with the waste products of what went into the mouth being expelled into the latrine. Eugene Peterson translates this, “Don’t you know that anything that is swallowed works its way through the intestines and is finally defecated.” So Jesus says you don’t need to worry

about what goes into the mouth. Concern yourself instead with what comes out of the mouth, for that is where the real defilement is found. The source of defilement, in other words, is not found outside of us but inside, in our hearts.

Have you ever spoken words that you almost immediately want to take back? The words seemed to spring forth from your mouth automatically, without having to think about it. When you realize what you've said, you may attempt to take them back by saying something like, "I was only kidding" or "I didn't really mean that." The truth is that you really did mean it, and your first words were a truer indication of your heart than your second words attempting to undo your first words. Our hearts break every single one of the last half of the Ten Commandments. Those are the ones Jesus names in verse 19.

An important application of this is to apply God's word to your heart by paying attention to all your words. Pay special attention to the unscripted words you speak. Why do you automatically attempt to shift the blame when accused of something? It is because your heart doesn't believe the gospel, that Jesus is adequate to pay for your sins. So you attempt to deal with your sins through a means other than believing the gospel. Why do you secretly enjoy hearing something bad about a rival, and then share it with someone else, acting as if you are saddened by that instead of that you are secretly rejoicing? Because your heart is evil and you refuse to believe the gospel? Why do words of criticism, boasting, deception and flattery come from your lips? Because your heart is in need of cleansing and you are trying to do it on your own.

It takes courage and faith to apply God's word to our hearts. I don't think it's an accident that Matthew reports these events right after talking about Peter taking the risk to walk on water to Jesus. Something of that kind of bold faith is needed for us to be honest about what is going on in our hearts. There is one final truth that is needed if we are to be courageous enough to let God's word penetrate deep into our hearts. We are going to have to believe that there is free and complete cleansing from Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus made all foods clean in this passage when he said that we are not defiled by what goes into the mouth. Only God has such authority to change the Old Testament dietary laws. And only God has the authority to make us clean of our filthy hearts. He promises to do so, through his blood spilled at the cross, to any who humble themselves and come to him in faith. We are so bold as to believe that this can happen because the Scriptures teach it, and we receive it alone as our source of authority.