



small groups

Discussion Guide



Our Hearts

Matthew 15:1-20

Ice Breaker

(5 minutes)

Discuss

- What kind of TV service do you use? Cable? Satellite? Antenna? None? What do you watch most?
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Lesson Review

(45 minutes)

This week's lesson was a warning against legalism.

Read Matthew 15:1-20

Don't Be That Guy

Andy found an illustration in the Rob Lowe DirecTV commercials, though he talked about the parallel in two different ways.

- Don't be like the legalist Rob Lowe (or pharisaical Peter) who makes everything weird. Drop the legalism and upgrade to grace!
- Don't be like the super cool Rob Lowe who is all about outward appearances. Drop the religious act and follow Jesus authentically.

Either approach works. The point is that Jesus is after our hearts, not our behaviors. And he wants us to treat others with the same heart-focus.

Read Mark 7:3-5

It's telling that the Pharisees asked Jesus why his disciples were "living" a certain way, as if non-hand-washing was a lifestyle. The Pharisees inflated rule-following to the level of identity. They also probably confused rule-following with righteousness. To them, washing was no longer a symbol of holiness, but a means by which to actually attain holiness. In other words, to them, you wash your hands (and follow other rules) *to make yourself righteous*. But a right understanding of the scriptures teaches us that we follow religious observances as a symbol of gratitude *for having already been made righteous*.

Andy said there were 186 pages of commands in the Mishnah about ceremonial washing. Then he ran through a list of several issues where evangelicals have created our own Mishnah: things like clothing, haircuts, smoking, drinking, dancing, gambling, voting, etc.

Discuss

- Where do you see today's church emphasizing behavior or rule-keeping over the heart?

Pharisaical Righteousness

In the Sermon On the Mount, another place where Jesus raises the bar of faith, he says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

This would have sounded like a death sentence to Jesus' audience. The Pharisees kept rules better than anyone. It was as if Jesus was saying, "Unless you can run faster than Usain Bolt, you will not enter the kingdom." Jesus was negating the power of rule-following to make us righteous.

If you think about it, it's foolish to think something like washing our hands - or even 186 pages of somethings like that - could set us right with God. Our righteousness is something we could never earn. It would require our death, and even that wouldn't do. At the end of the service we sang "Rock Of Ages." Consider these lyrics.

Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Discuss

- Are you tempted to think that God will accept you or bless you more if you keep rules? When did you last have that thought?

Peter's Lesson

In verse 12 of Matthew's account, the disciples point out to Jesus that the Pharisees were offended by his teaching on this matter. Then in verse 15, it's Peter who asks for a clearer explanation from Jesus. Andy speculated that it was Peter who brought this up with Jesus and that Peter was just as offended as the Pharisees. This is, in fact, a theme in Peter's life.

Read Acts 10:9-16 and Galatians 2:11-13

(Keep in mind, "Cephas" is another name for Peter.)

But Andy noted that, eventually, Peter learned his lesson. And, in fact, when Christianity began to spread, it was Peter who defended the Gentiles' freedom from religious laws.

Read Acts 15:5-11

It's interesting to note the story that immediately follows today's passage in Matthew's gospel.

Read Matthew 15:21-28

Discuss

- What about this story reinforces Peter's lesson?
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Application

(10 minutes)

You've been asked to discuss pharisaical attitudes in others; now it's time to identify them in yourself. Andy asked us to apply this scripture by reading Psalm 139:23

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Discuss

- What issues bring out your inner rule-keeping Peter? When are you most tempted to insist on better behavior from others?

Close by praying for someone who is engaging in behavior that offends you.