

Study Questions for Matthew 15:1–20 (NKJV)

Matthew 15:1–20 challenges superficial religion and calls for heart-level obedience. Jesus moves the conversation from ritual to reality, from tradition to truth, from appearance to authenticity.

Parallel Passages:

- **Mark 7:1–23** (primary parallel account)
 - No direct narrative parallel in Luke or John, though similar concerns appear in **Luke 11:37–41** and **John 2:24–25**.
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1. What does the confrontation in verses 1–2 reveal about the spiritual priorities of the Pharisees, and how can misplaced priorities still affect believers today?

The Pharisees traveled from Jerusalem to challenge Jesus over ceremonial handwashing (Matthew 15:1–2; Mark 7:3–4). Their focus was not moral failure but ritual noncompliance. This shows how easily secondary matters can become primary. Jesus later rebuked similar imbalance, saying they neglected “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23).

Everyday Application:

We may strongly defend preferences—music style, dress codes, traditions—while overlooking kindness, integrity, or forgiveness. This passage invites us to ask: Are we more disturbed by broken customs or broken relationships?

2. How does Jesus expose the danger of elevating tradition above God’s Word (vv. 3–6), and what does this teach about spiritual authority?

Jesus cites the command to honor parents (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16) and shows how the “Corban” practice (Mark 7:11) allowed people to withhold support from parents under a religious pretense. By doing so, they “made the commandment of God of no effect” (Matthew 15:6). Tradition became a loophole for disobedience.

Scripture warns against adding to or diminishing God’s commands (Deuteronomy 4:2).

Everyday Application:

Spiritual language can sometimes mask avoidance—“I’m too busy serving at church” may become an excuse for neglecting family or personal responsibilities. God never calls us to disobey His clear Word in the name of religious activity.

3. In quoting Isaiah 29:13 (vv. 7–9), what distinction does Jesus make between external worship and internal devotion?

Jesus emphasizes the heart: “These people draw near to Me with their mouth... but their heart is far from Me” (Matthew 15:8). God evaluates inward reality (1 Samuel 16:7). Worship without heart engagement is described as “vain” (Matthew 15:9).

True worship involves spirit and truth (John 4:23–24).

Everyday Application:

It is possible to sing, pray, and participate outwardly while inwardly distracted, bitter, or indifferent. A helpful practice is pausing before worship to ask, “Lord, is my heart aligned with my words?” Authentic faith begins beneath the surface.

4. What radical shift does Jesus introduce in verses 10–11 regarding defilement?

Jesus declares that defilement comes not from what enters the mouth but from what proceeds from it (Matthew 15:11; Mark 7:15). This moves the focus from ceremonial purity to moral purity. Proverbs 4:23 affirms that life flows from the heart.

Under the New Covenant, transformation is internal (Jeremiah 31:33).

Everyday Application:

We may focus on external habits—what we consume, wear, or avoid—while neglecting anger, envy, or pride. Jesus teaches that our words reveal our spiritual condition. Listening to our speech patterns can reveal what is shaping our heart.

5. Why were the disciples concerned about the Pharisees being offended (v. 12), and how should believers balance truth and sensitivity?

The disciples observed that the Pharisees were offended (Matthew 15:12). The Greek idea behind “offended” implies being caused to stumble. Jesus did not retract truth to preserve approval. Paul later wrote that seeking to please men over God compromises servanthood (Galatians 1:10).

However, Scripture also commands speaking truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Everyday Application:

There is a difference between being offensive and causing offense by truth. We should examine our tone and attitude, but we cannot dilute biblical conviction to avoid discomfort—especially in moral or relational matters.

6. What does Jesus mean by “Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted” (v. 13)?

Jesus suggests that systems, teachings, or spiritual movements not established by God will ultimately be removed (Matthew 15:13). Psalm 1:3–6 contrasts the righteous (firmly planted) with the ungodly (like chaff).

Truth rooted in God’s Word endures (Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 7:24–27).

Everyday Application:

Cultural trends and spiritual fads often rise quickly but fade. Building convictions on Scripture rather than popularity provides long-term stability. Ask: Is this belief rooted in God’s Word or in shifting opinion?

7. What warning is contained in the phrase “blind leaders of the blind” (v. 14)?

Spiritual blindness affects both guide and follower (Matthew 15:14). Paul later warns that some claim to be “a guide to the blind” while failing to practice what they teach (Romans 2:19–21).

Spiritual discernment requires humility and testing teaching against Scripture (Acts 17:11; 1 John 4:1).

Everyday Application:

We must be thoughtful about who influences our thinking—pastors, authors, media voices. Likewise, anyone who mentors children, leads a group, or gives advice carries responsibility. Personal integrity must accompany spiritual influence.

8. According to verses 17–20, how does sin develop, and how can the heart be transformed?

Jesus lists sins—evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, thefts, false witness, blasphemies—as originating in the heart (Matthew 15:19). James 1:14–15 explains that desire conceives and brings forth sin. External behavior is the fruit of internal formation.

Transformation requires renewed thinking (Romans 12:2), walking in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16), and storing God’s Word in the heart (Psalm 119:11).

Everyday Application:

Instead of merely managing behavior, believers must address thought patterns, resentments, and unchecked desires early. Regular self-examination (Psalm 139:23–24) and confession (1 John 1:9) help prevent hidden attitudes from becoming visible consequences.