

Who is Jesus?
Matthew 15:1-20

Pastor Tom
June 26, 2016

What do LeBron James, Muhammed Ali, and Gordie Howe all have in common? LeBron James and his Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team just won the NBA championship against great odds. Muhammed Ali, formerly Cassius Clay, was a boxer who became world famous for his quotes and activism. Gordie Howe earned the nickname Mr. Hockey in his years as a Detroit Red Wing.

But what do they have in common? Well 2 of them currently died. Gordie Howe was 88; Ali was 74. But LeBron still lives and enjoys the championship just won. The common factor is people responded in a significant way to their lives or accomplishments.

The Cavaliers just had a victory parade through Cleveland this week. And Cleveland responded. Hundreds of thousands came out to celebrate, pay tribute and rejoice in that city's first professional sports championship in 52 years. Louisville, Kentucky responded at Muhammed Ali's funeral. Thousands came out to pay tribute to a local son who had grown up in relative poverty and obscurity to become a world famous activist. Detroit responded at Gordie Howe's funeral. Thousands stood in line to pay their respects and remember what he meant to that community.

When someone's life influences or inspires, others respond especially in times of memorial or tribute. So how have you responded to Jesus' life and teaching this past week? If someone could look at a video of your life over the past 7 days, would they see evidence that you have been influenced, inspired and affected by Jesus life and teaching?

We have been learning about Jesus through the Gospel of Matthew. We do this because of Jesus' command to go and make disciples in all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that that He commands. Every Christian is called to grow as a disciple of Christ. Every Christian is called to make other disciples of Christ.

But how do we grow? We must learn about Jesus' life and teaching. That's what Matthew provides for us. But we must not only learn. We must respond to Jesus' life and teaching. Like the citizens of Cleveland, Louisville and Detroit responded to the people mentioned earlier, we must continually respond to Jesus' life and teaching. Not by standing on a street corner during a parade but by living on day by day under Jesus' lordship empowered by His spirit.

What will our response be? Not responding is a response. It communicates boredom with Jesus or writing Him off as irrelevant to daily

life. This is not the response called for by Jesus from His disciples. Today, we have another opportunity to hear Jesus' teach and learn of His life. I pray God may use our time together to impact us with His presence and move us to appropriate responses to Jesus.

Matthew 15:1-20 (ESV)

15 Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."³ He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?⁴ For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'⁵ But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God,"⁶ he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word^l of God.⁷ You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

⁸ "This people honors me with their lips,

but their heart is far from me;

⁹ in vain do they worship me,

teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

¹⁰ And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand:¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."¹² Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?"¹³ He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up."¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a

pit."¹⁵ But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us."¹⁶ And he said, "Are you also still without understanding?¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled?¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander."²⁰ These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."

Matthew has revealed to us much about Jesus' identity. We learned that Jesus is

- The rejected Messiah leading a rejected people who are accepted by God. (13:53-14:12)
- The miraculous provider of bread for a multitude in a desolate place. (14:13-21)
- The Lord over nature who walks on water (14:22-25)
- The divine encourager who uses the name of God (14:26-27)
- The savior of his people who have little faith (14:28-33)
- The Son of God
- The compassionate healer of Israel (14:34-36)

Who is Jesus? This passage reveals that Jesus is **The Authoritative Teacher of God's Word**. Some Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus from Jerusalem. Remember the Pharisees were like the evangelical pastors of the day. The Sadducees connected with the upper class Jews and the royal family. They were all about power, wealth and influence. The Pharisees connected with the common people. They were serious about God's Word and His Law. They had become the leading religious group in the nation when it came to interpreting God's Word. Their zeal on one hand was

commendable. They were very concerned about taking God seriously. They worked hard at translating the law into practical ways people could live it out in their daily lives. We know that not all Pharisees opposed Jesus. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to learn more from Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea boldly asked for the body of Jesus at great risk to his position and reputation. The Apostle Paul was a Pharisee who later believed in Christ.

But this group seems to be an official delegation sent from Pharisee headquarters in Jerusalem. Remember, Jesus ministers in Galilee way up North. Word seems to have gotten back to the lead Pharisees in Jerusalem about the teaching of this rabbi Jesus. So this delegation comes from the capital to question Him. They ask, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat?” Some of you parents with younger children agree with these Pharisees right? You’re trying to teach your children about the importance of washing their hands before they eat. So Jesus allowed His disciples to eat without washing their hands?

It’s very likely Jesus disciples did wash their hands for hygienic purposes before eating. The Pharisees are talking about the tradition of their elders where there was an additional ritual cleansing that needed to take place. The Old Testament law did require priests to ritually wash their hands and

feet prior to performing their duties. But it seems the Pharisees made ritual washing a requirement of all Israelites prior to eating. It was motivated by their zeal to carefully avoid any possibility of becoming unclean. This regulation was part of something called the tradition of the elders. This tradition was an oral or spoken law – a continuing elaboration of rules for living based on the Old Testament but going far beyond it. These rules were written down in the 200’s and are today known as the Mishnah. It has 6 major parts. In the sixth part, addressing purity and defilement, there are 30 chapters dealing with household utensils and how they fare in terms of purity. There’s another section that deals with impurity of stalks of fruit. Another addresses liquids that may make food ritually impure. Maybe you want to get a copy of the Mishnah for summer reading. It’s only about 800 pages of rules. So this was not God’s law but an attempt to apply God’s law to everyday life. Ritually washing hands was a tradition of the elders. Somewhere someone observed that Jesus’ disciples did not conform to the tradition of ritually washing their hands before eating. Jesus does not deny that his disciples do not engage in ritual washing.

But Jesus sees a much bigger problem. He immediately answers their question with another question. “And why do you break the

commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” Then he cites another tradition of the elders. They followed this one so carefully, that they failed to notice that they actually broke God’s law when doing it. It wasn’t any old law. It was one of the 10 commandments. Verse 4 – “For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and “whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.”” This is the fifth commandment that we parents love to quote to our children in times of disagreement. Jesus quotes another command that reinforces the fifth commandment. Those who don’t honor their father and mother should surely be put to death. We parents could maybe use that for motivating. Israelites were supposed to honor their parents. That meant a lot more than giving cards on Mother’s or Father’s Day though that is a nice gesture today. Honoring father and mother included financial support. When your parents were unable to provide for themselves, God commanded their young adult children to take care of them.

So Jesus reviews the law and then cites their tradition. “But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honor his father or mother.” So the Pharisees developed this tradition that if you devoted something to God, it exempted or excused you from other responsibilities. So say you devoted

your land or your property or your house to God. No one could put a claim against the devoted item. No one included your aged parents who needed support in their later years. So a Pharisee could say, “I’d like to support you Dad and Mom, but I’ve devoted this house or this property to the Lord. According to the tradition of the elders, I can’t break that oath. You’ll have to find support elsewhere.” However, the owner could still live in the house or live off the land or make profits from their property until they died and the land or house went over to the temple. Now it was honorable to devote or give something for the Lord’s work but not at the expense of violating the 5th commandment. Children could refuse to honor their father and mothers financially because they had made this vow about their property. They elevated their elder’s tradition above God’s law. Jesus makes this clear at the end of verse 6 – “so for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.”

If there was any doubt about the motivation behind the Pharisee’s tradition, Jesus dispels it in the next verse. “You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied about you when he said “This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” Jesus leaves no room for the possibility that the Pharisees made an honest mistake. They had gone way

off track elevating their human tradition above God's law while proclaiming themselves as defenders of the law.

And Jesus will not stop there. He sees a crucial opportunity to instruct the people away from one of the Pharisees burdensome traditions. Verse 10 – And he called the people to him and said, “Hear and understand, it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” Jesus goes back to the Pharisee's original charge about ritual washing. He corrects that. “Eating food with hands that have not gone through the rigorous ceremonial washing prescribed by the Pharisees will not defile you morally. It's what comes out of your mouth that defiles a person.” He's not talking about vomiting or spitting or sneezing. But what comes out of your heart often comes out of your mouth. Defilement comes from the evil and corrupt nature in our hearts. Jesus gives several examples of this in verse 19. “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness and slander.” These examples violate one of the 10 commandments. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not bear false witness. Jesus clarifies the nature of true defilement. Failing to properly and perfectly perform a ritual does not defile us. It's what's in our hearts that matters.

The Pharisees do not take Jesus' rebuke well. They expected to confront and correct Him publicly. Instead, He confronts and corrects them publicly. The disciples hear about the Pharisee's response. So they come and inform Jesus about this in verse 12. “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying – that one about “it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles but what comes out of the mouth?” They are offended, literally scandalized, at having their reputation tainted in front of the people.

So what does Jesus do? “Oh, I'm so sorry Pharisees. I take it back. I didn't mean to offend you.” Verse 13 – He answered – “Every plant that my Father has not planted will be rooted up.”

What Lord? What are you saying? These are the religious leaders of our people? These are the ones who come and show great concern for God's law. Rooting up plants implies they're not going to grow and flourish. What do you mean?”

He means that the Pharisees who held these views weren't planted by the Father. They weren't true believers of God. Some of them would come around later. But Jesus pronounces that this group, this official delegation from Jerusalem, did not believe and trust in the living God.

Just to ensure that His disciples are not in any way unclear about his position, Jesus follows up the rooting up plant saying with this – “Let them alone or Leave them. They are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” Here is a very significant break in this Gospel. Remember earlier, the Pharisees had questions. Jesus answered their questions. Then they had accusations and He responds with counter accusations. But now He instructs His followers to leave them. Pharisees will no longer be the authoritative spokesmen and interpreters of God’s Word for Jesus’ followers. They must leave them because they are like blind guides leading blind people. Leaders who elevate their traditions above God’s Word lead their followers into some pit away from God. Jesus reveals Himself as the authoritative teacher of God’s Word. Wow. Did you know Jesus had this in Him?

So how might we respond to this? Cleveland responded to Lebron James and the victory. Louisville responded to Muhammed Ali’s death. Detroit lined up to pay tribute to Gordie Howe. How will we respond to Jesus, the authoritative teacher of God’s Word? **Response 1 - Let no other tradition or authority take supremacy over God and His Word.** A Christ follower needs to place God and His Word in the supreme position over their lives. We need to live our lives in accordance with God’s Word. We

need to get to know God through His Word and understand His law that is set out for our good and our benefit and the benefit of those around us. We practice this by incorporating the Scriptures into our lives every day and asking God to speak to us through His Word. We cannot let any other tradition or authority take the supreme place in our lives.

But that’s a lot easier said than done. We can allow other influences, sources or experiences to trump God’s Word, not Donald Trump – some card game a trump card is the superior card to all the others. Some people let personal spiritual experiences take priority over God and His Word. I am not saying that personal encounter with God is unimportant. It is part of the Christian life. But if we elevate experiences above God and his Word that go against His Word, we’re headed for that pit. Who gets the authority – God or our experience? This occurs when a married Christian announces to their spouse that “God told me to leave you for another person.” How does that work? What god has wired together let no one separate. Or “God told me that Jesus isn’t the only way to Him.” How can that be in light of the testimony of God’s Word?

Sometimes people can put human knowledge or reason above God and His Word. “I won’t believe anything that can’t be proved by science. If I can’t completely explain it, then I won’t believe it. Jesus walked on water?

Yah right. That was probably just some symbolic story that Matthew cooked up to inspire people. But it didn't happen because it couldn't happen." Do you see how human reason or knowledge gets elevated as supreme over God and His Word? Please do not misunderstand me to say that Christianity is not reasonable or does not have solid hard evidence to support its claims. We have a reasonable faith. Grounded with solid historical evidence. But there are some things beyond explanation. That's where faith comes in. We can't see God right now. But does that prove He doesn't exist? Yet elevating sight and proof as a higher authority than God and Scripture can lead us away from God.

Sometimes people elevate their own personal preferences or tastes above God and His Word. So we disregard a piece of Scripture because we don't like what it says. Or it goes against what we want to do with our lives. So they just ignore it or place our preferences above God's Word. Hebrews 13:4 – "Let marriage be held in high honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." God commands Christ followers that the only appropriate relationship for sex is within marriage. So you either get married or remain celibate. But lots of Christians don't abide by that today. Maybe they don't know this command or just don't like God's law in this area. People everywhere are

doing it. So they live together or have sex outside of marriage and place that personal preference above God and His Word.

Jesus shows us here that no other tradition or authority, including our own personal preferences can take supremacy over Him and His Word. Yet I think this also requires that we somehow find a balance between good and bad tradition. Some of us here today absolutely love this command because we're generally anti-traditional. Some of us may be a little nervous with this because we're generally pro-traditional. But we need to be careful on either side. Anti-traditionalists may conclude that everything old is bad and everything new is good. We can let our anti-traditional or ultra-traditional stance become a tradition that we hold with higher value than God's Word. But Jesus was neither. He came to fulfill the law and bring in a New Covenant. I think He calls us to discern the good from the bad tradition and the good newness from bad newness. Does any human tradition or personal preference take priority over God and His Word in your life?

A second way we can respond to Jesus as the authoritative teacher of God's Word - **Response 2 - Understand that God works in our lives from the inside out.** Good news, God changes hearts which lead to changed behavior. It doesn't work the other way around. Changed external

behavior does not lead to a changed heart. Jesus charged the Pharisees with hypocrisy. That means they portrayed themselves as something that they weren't. They performed the external ritual requirements of their traditions. But their hearts were far from God. They, like we, need God's changing work in our hearts first.

We can slam the Pharisees. How could they think that the ritual washing of hands before meals proves a heart right with God? But we can do the same thing. We can participate in any of the external Christian practices yet have hearts far from God. "I showed up at church today. I sang a song. I've done my duty. I didn't kill anyone. I gave to charity. This proves I'm right with God." Really? All these can indicate a heart change. But they can also mask a hard heart. Or we can believe unless our behavior is good enough, God won't accept us. So we try to do a certain amount of good deeds and hope God sees that and they outweigh our bad deeds. But the Gospel says stop trying to live up to that never ending quest to outweigh the bad things with the good. Accept God's forgiveness and give your heart to his transforming will. In God's way of doing things

external behavior should come out of what's happening internally. External conformity to some law will not change hearts.

One commentator writes, the only cure for spiritual heart disease is through the penetrating, transforming work of the kingdom of God in our lives. As we allow Jesus to unleash the power of the Spirit in our hearts, we will experience an inward transformation that will begin to influence our thoughts, our actions, our emotions and our relationships. Have you allowed your heart to be transformed by Jesus? Cleveland responded to Lebron and the Cavaliers with a great parade. Now they will probably go through the summer buying Cavalier championship gear and celebrating the victory. Louisville honored Muhammed Ali and now may think about his legacy. Detroit honored Gordie Howe and may think about how they might live honorably like he did.

We have met Jesus, the authoritative teacher of God's Word. How will we respond?