The Jesus Who Offends
Matthew 14:34-15:20

Imagine you're walking through the airport bookshop and you see a book titled, 'How to sharpen your sword by candlelight.' Or your browsing the internet and you come across a site devoted to 'weaving a tapestry whilst sat in the back of a horse drawn carriage.' You'd probably think that has absolutely nothing to do with your life. And this morning we're going to look at a passage that, on the surface, seems exactly the same, it's dealing with an issue from another culture and totally another era - something seemingly irrelevant to you.

And yet… by the time Jesus has dealt with it he's got to the heart of stuff that messes up our lives and crucially our relationship with God.

Matthew 14:34-15:20

So on the one hand, with normal people, Jesus' popularity is growing. He and the disciples have crossed the Sea of Gaililee, and when they get to the other side, Matthew says, chapter 14v35, 'the men of that place recognised him', and spread the word, and soon he's surrounded by people desperate just to touch him and be healed.

But alongside that growing popularity was growing opposition – not from the everyday folk, but from the religious leaders. Chapter 15v1, 'Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus *from Jerusalem*', from the religious epicentre, the Harvard of Jewish religion. So why has a delegation of the religious elite gone to all the hassle of trudging north to the backwoods of Galilee?

Well, it seems they've heard that Jesus' disciples don't wash their hands when they eat. Now you might hear that and think, 'shock, horror! Really? They're getting agitated about washing your hands before meals? What world do they live in?' I mean, speaking as a father, it's a triumph if you can get your kids to wash their hands once, in their entire lifetime, let alone before every meal.

So what's the big deal? Well, if Jesus' disciples can only have let hand-washing slip, if he – their rabbi - had taught them to do that, or modelled that to them. And if that's the case, Jesus has undermined something absolutely central, the foundation even, of the way the Pharisees and scribes see, and live, all of life. It's a direct assault on their worldview.

Three points: The problem of religion, the problem of the heart, and the solution we need.

The Problem of Religion
Verse 2, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." Now, the Old Testament tells us how God rescued and freed the people of Israel from slavery. And he saved them to be his people, and to live in covenant relationship with him as their king. And the Old Testament law told them how they were to do that. And there were laws on what was clean and unclean, what was holy and unholy, so that every day life – what they ate, what they did - became a school room for learning that God was dangerously, unapproachably holy, that he was set-apart, and unlike them.

The problem was that, over time, the people didn't live as God called them to live. Instead, they ran off after other gods, gods who let them live however they wanted to live, gods who were anything but different from them, gods who gloried in money, sex and power. And as a result, God sent them into exile from the Promised Land – because the ultimate penalty for breaking God's law was to be cut off from God's people and from relationship with him.

And that punishment of exile left a deeply traumatic scar in the national Jewish psyche. And you know what that's like, don't you? In medicine we used to talk about having cortical scars – mental scars. You had a patient where everything went badly wrong, and you remember that, and your future practice is shaped by that – you never want to make that mistake again. Or maybe you do something and it ends badly, or painfully, and you never want to experience that again, so you avoid it.

Well, when the people of Israel returned from exile, a movement grew up that determined that would never happen again. And to decrease any risk of the people breaking the law, the religious leaders, the elders as the Pharisees call them here, developed a whole system of additional rules that built a fence around the law – that would stop people from getting anywhere close to breaking the law. And ceremonially washing your hands before meals was one such rule, to decrease any risk of you eating unclean food. And eventually they even specified how much water had to be used per hand to make sure the hand was really clean.

The problem is that whilst the initial motivation may have been good it had at least two negative impacts – both of which Jesus takes aim at.

Verse 3, 'He [Jesus] answered them....' Except he doesn't answer them – instead he asks them a question. Verse 3 again, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" They accuse him of breaking tradition, and in response Jesus accuses them of breaking God's word for their tradition. In other words – they have placed the teaching of men on the same level as God's word, and in reality given it an authority above God's word.

And that's the first problem of religion, isn't it? That over time, what God says becomes less important than our traditions, than the way we do things and like things to be. And God's word gets relegated down our list of authorities.

And to bring that home to them Jesus gives them an example. He reminds them that God's word makes it very clear that God's people will honour and care for their parents: v4, "For God commanded, 'Honour your father and your mother.'" And when he says that, he's quoting the fifth of the Ten Commandments, the centre, if you like, of how God's rescued people will display his character to the world.

But honouring your parents, especially elderly parents, can be costly, can't it? It costs you time and energy and… money. But according to this extra set of rules, if

you dedicated your money to God, so that on your death it went to the temple, you couldn't then give it away to others – like your elderly parents - because you'd already promised it to God. But you could still use it for yourself. And it seems that was just what the Pharisees were doing. So Jesus says to them, v6, "For the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God." Their tradition, their extra rules, trumped the word of God. And in this case they liked it that way, because like many of us, they liked money - because money gives us security, and power, and influence – and elderly parents don't.

So when they were living for a goal where God's command proved awkward, they found a way to sideline it – or at least their rules enabled them to sideline it.

Now you might think – 'well I'd never do that! I'd never think money mattered more than caring for my parents!' Sure, but when God's word demands something of us that's costly, or puts us at odds with society around us, in such a way as it might cost us the respect of others, what's the equivalent of the Pharisees religious tradition then for you? Because there's always something isn't there? Something that, in that moment, we are tempted to give more weight to, more authority to, than God's word.

And it might be the weight of what our individualistic, materialistic society currently says is ok. It might be your friends or social circle and what they say. It might be the well known views of some social elites or celebrities. And they become the tradition of the elders, they shift the scales away from the word of God. And when what God asks of us is costly, then what they say seems all the more attractive – because it means we can live and pursue the goals we want. It means we can be the lawmakers and rule makers for our own lives.

But, if the first problem of religion - whether 1st century Judaism or 21st century secularism, is to undermine God's word in our lives, the second is hypocrisy.

Verses 7-9, "You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said: "this people honours me with their lips but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."'

Now in the past, if an army wanted to hide what it was doing in battle one trick was to lay down a smokescreen – a thick mass of smoke so the enemy couldn't see what was going on behind it. And religion can offer us just such a smokescreen, can't it? A smokescreen of respectability that hides our self-centredness. You see, on the outside these Pharisees might look like incredibly generous and godly philanthropists who've left everything in their wills to religious causes - when they die God gets everything! But in reality, while they lived, God got nothing, and neither did their parents, except their pious words.

And you can be very religious, and do and say all the right things, but in reality, life is centred around 'me'. And our religious practice can hide a pride that thinks itself better than others, or a pride that thinks we can save ourselves if we do enough good that God is in my debt. And to bring that home Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah – we can honour God with our lips, we can pray, we can sing, we

can advocate for causes, but it's just our lips. God gets our best words, but our hearts, the real us… that's a different matter.

The Problem of the Heart

And Jesus gathers the crowd around him and goes back to the Pharisees original criticism. Verse 10: 'And he called the people to him and said to them, "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."

In other words, all those food laws of clean and unclean – they were never an end in themselves. They were there to teach you something profound, something about yourself and something about God. That there *is* stuff that contaminates and separates you from God. But listen – it's not food. It's you. It's your own heart. And no amount of hand washing, no amount of external religion can do anything about it. It can never penetrate deep enough.

Now, for a Jewish person, that was like an intellectual earthquake, so Peter goes to Jesus, asks him to explain, and Jesus tells him, 'Look, what you eat gets digested and dealt with. It has no impact on where you stand with God'. But, v18, "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person." It's the real you, the inner you, your thoughts and feelings, your wants and desires, your head and your heart, all expressed in some way by how you speak, how you treat others, how you think, how you do or do not keep your word, that's what makes you unclean. Verse 19, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." So it's not the outside that needs washing, it's the inside.

Now, if you were one of these Pharisees, and this carpenter turned rabbi told you you're a hypocrite, that the way you see the world is totally wrong, and that you're rotten on the inside, how would you feel? Well, the disciples come to Jesus and tell him how the Pharisees feel, v12, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard these things?" But it's no less offensive today, is it? I mean, the idea that there might actually be such a thing as sexual immorality, that we can't do whatever we want with our bodies, or that greed, and the ever getting of more might be wrong, or the fact that there is such a thing as false witness which means there must be such a thing as absolute truth that applies to me and to you, all of these are offensive to our highly individualistic age.

Or what about the idea that it might be me, on the inside, that's wrong, that rather than me being a victim of what others have done to me, in some why I'm responsible – that doesn't sit easy with the idea that I've just got to be true to myself, and deep down everyone's good, does it?

And yet, you know, that deep down everyone's not good. You know the reality of evil and selfishness in the world, and sometimes like a shadowy figure disappearing around a corner, we even get a glimpse of it in our own hearts. But if you doubt that – think about the sweetest little baby you've ever known. Does anyone ever have to teach her to be selfish? Does anyone have to teach him to snatch, or have a tantrum? I mean, I don't think I have ever come across a book

titled 'Bringing out the Darker side in Your child', because you don't need to learn how to do that do you? It just comes naturally. The books are on Taming your Toddler – because they're like wild animals; they have titles like Raising Kids you Can be Proud of – because it can go seriously wrong, or Effective Discipline – because you're going to need it!

Or come back to your own heart. How hard do you find it to pray or sing – or even just find peace - when you're angry, or when you're weighed down by guilt or shame – in those moments when God seems a million miles away – unapproachable in his holiness. What hope does washing hands or any other religious practice give you then? Because you know that at that moment the problem lies inside you, don't you? And Jesus knows it too – that it's not our hands that need washing – it's our hearts.

The Solution that We Need

I've told some of you this before, but some years back we spent a week as a family walking in the Pyrenees. And on one walk we took a path along a ledge. And on one side were overhanging rocks, and on the other, the mountain falling away beneath us, and the path was wet and slippery, and we had the four girls, who were much smaller back then, and all we could think of was keeping them safe from the edge. But as we rounded a bend we came across a young couple. And the young woman was paralysed by fear. And her husband had tied her head-scarf, as a blindfold, around her eyes, and he was trying to inch her, blindfolded, along that path to safety. Now, if that's scary enough, imagine if instead of just blindfolding, he was also blindfolded – and it was the blind leading the blind.

And yet that's exactly what Jesus says the religious leaders are trying to do: v14, "Let them alone; they are blind guides." They don't understand the problem of the human heart, so how can they teach you? They don't know the way, so how can they show it to you? You feel like you're trying to navigate through life blindfolded, but they're as blind as you – more so even because they don't think they are blind.

But hang on a minute, if the religious elite – if the academics from Jerusalem, if the guys who knew the law inside out, aren't the right guides, and if our modern equivalents – the weight of our culture or our celebrities, aren't true guides, then who is? Well, when Jesus quotes here from the prophet Isaiah, he's quoting from a passage in Isaiah 29, where God makes a promise – that when it seems that religious hypocrisy is winning the day, he will do something new, something wonderfully new, and God wraps it up by saying, 'And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.' (Isaiah 29:18)

In other words, Jesus is saying, 'What God promised he would do, he's doing: I'm the guide you need in your darkness, I'm the one who can make your heart new, and fill it with joy, so that you live for God and his glory, and exult in him rather than yourself.'

You see, whilst our culture tells us that you've got to be true to yourself, that you and you alone can be your guide, Jesus tells you something very different. Because you can never give yourself a heart transplant can you?

In CS Lewis's book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader,* there's a young boy named Eustace Scrubb. And he is a total pain in the neck, and he hates everyone and everyone hates him. But against his will, he's pulled into the world of Narnia and finds himself on the boat, the Dawn Treader, as the Narnians head off on a great sea adventure. But all along Eustace bitterly resents it, and complains about everything. Until one day the boat lands on an island, and Eustace becomes separated from the rest of the party and wandering off he finds himself in a cave filled with treasure – gold and silver and diamonds and rubies. And Eustace thinks he's made, because with all this wealth he can get his own back on everyone who's wronged him, everyone who's laughed at him, and pushed him off. Now he'll be the one with the power and they'll all have to come crawling to him. And in his tiredness Eustace falls asleep on all that treasure. But what he doesn't realize is that this is a dragon's hoard, and when he wakes up, to his horror, he's become a dragon. But in reality his outward appearance is just a mirror of the real him. The boy who was a dragon on the inside had become a dragon on the outside.

And Eustace begins to despair. He realises now what he's been like, he realises that his life will never be the same, and that now that he can never go back to the boat and the others he realises how much he longs to be restored to them. But then one day, Aslan the Lion comes to him, and takes him to a pool of water and tells him to undress – to take off his dragon skin – and jump into the water. So Eustace begins to peel off his skin, and at first he thinks it works, and there at his feet are his dragon's scales, but then he realises that underneath is another layer; so he does it again, and again. And he realises that he can never undragon himself. And it's then that Aslan steps forward, and does it for him, with his great lion claws. And when Eustace describes it later he says, 'The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt.' Until lying at his feet was has dragon skin, thicker, darker and more knobbly than anything he had managed to peel off himself. And then Aslan picked him up and threw him in the water. And Eustace saw that he'd turned into a boy again.

You see, we can never undragon ourselves, can we? We can never save ourselves, or wash ourselves deep enough. We can never give ourselves a new heart. Only Jesus can do that for us. And he died, and rose, and ascended, and sends his Spirit so that as we turn to him in repentance and faith he can do exactly that. It's the fulfilment of the promise God made through the prophet Ezekiel: 'I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you' (Ezek 36:26). And that's the new thing Jesus has come to do, to do away with the problem of religion and the problem of our hearts, so that you and I can live for a goal higher and infinitely greater, than ourselves.