

Jesus exposes our hearts

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[0 : 0 0] Well, do please turn with me, if you would, to Matthew chapter 15. Matthew 15. Jesus exposes our hearts.

Last week we faced up to the fact that being neutral or static is never an option in our journey in life with respect to Jesus Christ.

He is the great divider of men and women. And wherever we confront him in his word, whenever he thrusts his person upon us, either we're moved towards Jesus in faith and understanding.

There may be many perplexities. We may be confused. There may be many things we're unsure of. But whenever we're like Peter on the water saying to Jesus, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you, Jesus always answers and always draws us to him.

Either we're journeying like that towards him in faith and understanding, or we're moving away from Jesus. We're taking offense at him like the crowd in Nazareth did.

[1 : 0 9] And we're turning our backs on him and we're consigning ourselves to a path of ever-increasing blindness and unbelief. And that is the critical issue.

It's the issue of faith and understanding, faith in Jesus himself, loyalty and love to him above everything else, and understanding. In other words, a real grasp of his kingdom, of his gospel, of what it means, its priorities, its scope, its demands, its message and mission.

And the great surprise all the way through Matthew's gospel is where that faith is found and where it's not found. And it's a very, very nasty shock, very often, for the religious establishment.

Do you remember back to chapter 8, verse 11? Jesus said, Many from east and west, that is, pagan Gentiles and foreigners, many pagan Gentiles and foreigners will come and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, while the sons of the kingdom, the privileged people of God, the Israelites, while the sons of the kingdom will be cast into outer darkness.

Terrible shock. And it's a recurring theme all the way through Matthew's gospel. And the only conclusion that we can draw is that there were many people then, as there are now, in the church establishment, who are blind to their own blindness and unbelief.

[2 : 3 7] And according to Jesus, that is the most dangerous, that is the most damnable of positions to be in. And so in our passage today, we have to listen to Jesus exposing that kind of blindness and opposition as he executes it with a devastating sharpness.

And friends, this is one of the most devastating attacks that you'll find in the gospel. It's not the only one. Look on to chapter 23, you'll find pretty rough stuff there.

But it's all the more shocking when we realize that Jesus here is not firing a broadside at the deteriorating public morality. And he's not castigating the falsehood of pagan religion.

No. In his sight is not the pagan hedonists in the street outside, but the religious establishment. As he's speaking to the professing church of his day.

To the dutiful, moral, good-living folk who turned up every Sunday to hear the Bible talk from a podium very like this one. And yes, this tirade that we've read is directed at people just like us.

[3 : 53] Keen Bible people. And please note, especially at their leaders and teachers. People like me. And so I warn you, we're going to find this hard this morning.

We are. Better put your tin hats on. But as we look at these verses, do remember also that probably this is the first time that you've faced up to the message of these verses this week.

Probably this is the first time that Jesus has hit you in the guts. I've been wrestling with this all week. My guts are very sore. And maybe that's as it should be. Because Jesus says in verse 14, doesn't he, unless the teacher bows the yoke under the word of God, he will be a blind guide and he'll lead others into blindness and into stumbling.

Why is this message so tough? Why is Jesus challenging so hard the professing church? Well, the answer is simple. It's because Jesus hates religious sham and hypocrisy and pretense.

It's evidence of such conceit of self-justification. It's the very antithesis of what Jesus Christ stands for. It's a perversion of the very godliness that it pretends to be.

[5 : 09] And it's that above all other that brings scorn on the name of the Lord. Remember what Paul says in Romans 2 about God's people? You boast in God's word and yet you dishonor him by breaking it.

And the name of God is blasphemed among the nations because of you, God's people. You see, there's nothing worse than heartless false religion.

It doesn't matter how orthodox it is. Outwardly, it can be a show of great piety of maybe even impeccable doctrine but inwardly, well, there's a hardness, a rottenness of self-preoccupation and that is the total opposite of the heart of God.

And so what we have in these 20 verses is a vivid assault of the demands of the gospel of the kingdom upon the worldliness of organized religion.

However, however impeccable the biblical and doctrinal credentials can be, that is what this is. Jesus is not here, not lambasting liberals.

[6 : 16] No, the Pharisees were in Jesus' day a movement for orthodoxy in doctrine, for godliness, for piety, for truth. In that sense, there were many, many good and commendable things about the Pharisees' movement.

They were Bible people, at least in one sense. But all too quickly, they lost the heart of God. That was the problem.

And that's what Jesus exposed so clearly, so devastatingly, with such candor, as he thrust upon these people the challenge of the living gospel, of a life-transforming kingdom.

With all the demands of understanding that, with all the demands that that makes on everybody who truly hears the message. So you see, as Bible people ourselves, today, this is something that we can't afford not to take with deadly seriousness.

Jesus is talking to people like us. And we have to admit it, don't we, that one of the great hazards of churches, evangelical churches, is that we can too easily grow cold.

[7 : 24] We can grow satisfied with ourselves. We can become so easily established in our traditions, our ways. And so Jesus is always asking us, always, always in established churches today, where are your hearts?

Where is your heart? I can hear your lips say these things, but is your heart in tune with your lips, or has it drifted far away?

That's the question that Jesus is asking us. And the test is the response of our hearts to the full beam of the gospel shining on us to expose the truth that lies deep within.

How do we respond to the priorities that the gospel of the kingdom of Jesus Christ demands of us, especially in our life together here as a fellowship, in our organized life of worship and witness?

How do we measure up to the exposure that a confrontation with Jesus forces upon us? Well, that's a question. So as we look at these verses this morning, we have to face the music and dance.

[8 : 33] Let's listen to Matthew's message this morning. The first thing he shows us is this in verses one and two. The gospel always confronts us with an authority that exposes tradition.

Verse one and two make that so plain. Just look at them. A living gospel ministry, you see, and a situation of real advance of the kingdom of heaven always exposes hardness and opposition in the hearts of men and women.

Always. Because the issue is one of authority. Who is in control of our life? What is in control of our life? That's the real question.

Does Jesus Christ, does his gospel, does his priorities direct and dictate everything about our way of life, our personal life and our corporate life as a fellowship?

Or are we in control? Asserting our ways, asserting what the passage calls the tradition of the elders. That's the question. Well, you see, there's nothing like a clash with a situation where Jesus is truly at work, changing lives, changing hearts, to show up the truth about whether we are truly living under the authority of Jesus and his kingdom and his mission or our own traditions, our own authority.

[9 : 53] And that's exactly the context here. Just look at the end of chapter 14. Here's a wonderful example of evangelism and mission among this unreached people in Gennesaret. They were flocking to Jesus.

They're bringing everyone they knew to Jesus. And Jesus is touching the lives of a whole community. It's wonderful to see. It's a great mark of people, isn't it, who really understand the Lord Jesus, who really understand his mission.

They want to bring other people to Jesus. They do bring other people. They're not satisfied until Christ is touching the lives of all of their community. It's a wonderful picture.

As many as talked to Jesus were made well. Of course, it wasn't just physical healing. It was spiritual wholeness. That's what Jesus always brings when he confronts people.

It's a wonderful picture, but what a total contrast, isn't it, to verses 1 and 2. Here come the official leaders of the Bible churches. And it's a different plane altogether, isn't it?

[10 : 52] They don't seem to have any interest at all in the crowds entering the kingdom. They couldn't care less if people find Jesus or not. What's really important to them? Whether you wash your hands before meals.

Nothing about hygiene, it's all to do with ceremony. It's tradition. It wasn't anything that was in the Scriptures at all. It was something that had been added on as a tradition by the religious people.

The tradition of the elders. It's the way that we've done things here for a long time. It's the way we do things here. And why don't your people do it? That's the question. You see, what Jesus is doing and demanding in the gospel of the kingdom and its mission and priorities is messing up the comfortable thinking and the comfortable traditions of the established church.

And therefore, it's messing up the power and the authority of these church leaders. That's what's at issue, you see. Ultimately, the issue is one of authority. Who's in charge?

We often laugh, don't we, the way that we say things. Oh, well, we've always done it that way here. That's why we do this. And we may sometimes think, well, it's very trivial really. But actually, we need to understand why we say things like that.

[12 : 10] And the reason is that if we assert the traditions of men, the traditions of the elders, whatever they are, what we're doing is asserting ourselves.

Our power and our authority, our control, our self-rule. And that's a way of avoiding submission to the radical authority of Jesus Christ. It's refusing to bow to his command, to his direction.

No, we want to decide how to do it. We want to decide what the important things are. And that's the only reason why in churches things of utter triviality can become such huge issues that cause enormous ructions.

Because it challenges our authority. Whose authority rules in this church? That's the question. Who do we bow down to?

Is it that of Christ and his gospel alone or is it ourselves and what we want? That's what it so often is if we're honest, isn't it? We find ourselves saying in our hearts, well, I'm not at the center of this.

[13 : 14] It's not being done my way. So I'm going to be against it. I'm going to have nothing to do with it. That's what we're like, isn't it? You see, the traditions of men, the traditions of the elders give power to men and women.

And Jesus confronts all that kind of human authority with the authority of himself and his gospel and he exposes that truth. He shows that when you add to the gospel of Jesus Christ, you subtract from it.

When you try and add to God's authority, in fact, you destroy God's authority. You take God's authority into your own hands. And when you add to the gospel, you destroy the gospel and its power. There's so many examples of that throughout the history of the church and today.

It's probably easy for us as Protestant evangelicals to see that fault in the church of Rome where the official teaching of the church is that sacred tradition alongside scripture is one indivisible authority in the hands of the hierarchy of the church.

What does that mean? Well, what it means is that what really matters, of course, is what the hierarchy of the church says, the pope and the cardinals and so on. And what really matters is the Catholic distinctives and if you want to really be in, you must submit to that.

[14 : 29] And the gospel is supplanted. We can see that. We can see it also in some of the charismatic circles where people will say, yes, of course, we believe the Bible is the word of God, but also, we take great store by words of knowledge from the mouths of our contemporary prophets.

And of course, what becomes really important is that. It's far more exciting. It's far more immediate. And the authority comes into the hands of men. And we can have control in the hands of men.

And we can probably see that sort of thing quite clearly too. And it's not always so easy, is it, to see ourselves in the mirror. And how easy it is for us to slip into all kinds of traditions of the elders, our ways of doing things, the things we enjoy, the things that we will fight to keep unchanged and unchanging.

I wonder if you were struck, as I was most forcibly, by those extracts from Tom Allen's sermon over 50 years ago, as we were remembering that date a few weeks ago.

This is what he said. We must be prepared to seek new methods of dealing with our unique responsibilities. And that may mean letting go of some of the cherished and well-loved features of the church's life.

[15 : 43] You see, that was the challenge that he was giving. Exactly the challenge that Jesus gives here. So we need to ask ourselves, how ready are we to let go of some of the cherished things in our own personal lives, in our church lives, if the demands of the priorities of Christ's kingdom overshadow them?

That's the kind of exposure that we have to submit ourselves to if we submit ourselves to Christ's authority. What's my attitude of something that I like, something that I enjoy in church life or in my personal life needs to stop for a while or needs to stop forever for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

How do I react when what Jesus is doing and demanding in my own personal life, my work life, my family life, my church life messes up my comfortable thinking, messes up the way I like to do things?

See, that's a challenge, isn't it? And that's the challenge that the gospel of Jesus and his mission brings. Who's authority? Who's in charge? Jesus isn't saying there was anything wrong with hands washing, but what he is saying is what is the priority here?

What's the real driving force? Is it God's word and work? Or is it our control and our comfort? And so you see the truth begins to come out when we probe below the surface.

[17 : 13] Now it brings us to the second point in verses 3 to 9 in Jesus' reply to the Pharisees. The gospel always demands an integrity, you see, that exposes sham.

You see, the gospel and its demands exposes the truth that men add to the word of God in order to enthrone themselves and give themselves a place of authority and control instead of God.

And that means that you have to distance yourself and protect yourself from the real challenge and cut of God's word. You see, when you add to God's word, you don't just end up trying to put your own authority above God's.

In fact, you absolutely destroy God's word completely. That's what verse 6 says. You make God's word null and void. You destroy it. And that's what verses 3 to 6 plainly state.

You're not only disobeying God's word, you're destroying it because you're doing the opposite of what it really means, what it really commands us. And that's far worse than the rank pagans do.

[18 : 17] It's worse because it pretends. It pretends to speak and act for the living God, the one true God. But in fact, it's total hypocrisy. It's sham. So it takes God's name in vain.

It makes people curse God when they look at you. And that has been, hasn't it, the terrible indictment of the church of Jesus Christ down the ages. People have been able to point to us and say, well, so much for your faith, so much for your God.

Look at you. It's what always happens when the traditions of the elders, the authority of men and women replaces the authority of the gospel of God and the priorities of his kingdom.

Outwardly, the actions may look very pious, very religious, very proper, but inwardly, Jesus says, no, your hearts are far from me, far away. Verse 3, you see, Jesus challenges them with a specific example.

And by the way, notice that Jesus never deals with vague generalities, does he? That's what we like. We don't like preaching to be too specific. We like it to be vague and general so we can brush it off, but Jesus picks an issue in the congregation right in front of him and he addresses it face on, right in their face.

[19 : 34] He picks up a custom that they've adopted to a wonderful piece of self-delusion and exploitation. It can make you feel very smug and very holy. Save yourself a fortune in money at the same time.

It was a particular type of tax dodge that went on. What he says, you see, in verse 4, is God's commandment is clear. Honor your father and mother. He quotes another application of that and the law was full of many ways in which that command was applied to show that it meant a duty of care and responsibility.

Not just to parents when you're young, but to parents when they are old and you're responsible to look after them financially and all of these things. But you see, verse 5 explains that the Pharisees had added as one of their rules, one of their traditions, a vow that you could make to devote your money as holy money set apart for the work of God.

It was called given to God there in verse 5. Mark's gospel gives it a technical name, Korban, Mark 7, 11. You could say, oh, that money of mine is devoted to God.

Now you might say, well, that's well and good. It's good to devote money to God. And it is. But once you made this vow, you see there was no going back in it. And so what did people do when they wanted to get out of supporting their parents financially?

[20 : 51] When they wanted to get out of giving them the extra money that would pay their heating bill or their council tax or help them to get a new car or whatever it is to make their life easier? Oh, you'd say this, oh, I'd love to help you, but you see, I'm a very pious person.

I'm an evangelical Christian and I've made my money Korban and I'm afraid it's an irreversible virus. So if only I could, I would help you, but it's been devoted to God. And so you see, you can feel very smug.

You can say, it's one of the costs of my costly discipleship to God. But of course, it's no cost to me at all, is it? It's a cost to you. And the Pharisees and the scribes, you see, had not only invented these rules, they'd aided and abetted the abuse of them by making these vows and their traditions far more important than the command of God.

And you can see the scandal of that. You can see it's a total sham. And Jesus says, you're not just breaking the command of God, you're making his command a mockery. You're making it void. You're destroying the gospel.

That's the opposite of the heart of God. You're colluding and collaborating in a total sham. where everyone's talking in wonderful spiritual terms about giving to God when in fact what it really is is giving to themselves at the expense of others.

[22 : 12] It looks wonderfully spiritual. Maybe it feels wonderfully spiritual. But in fact, what you're doing is behaving far, far worse than the pagans. That's what Paul says in 1 Timothy 5 and 8.

If anyone doesn't look after their relations, especially the nearest, they're worse than the pagans. They've abandoned the faith. But you're dressing it up in lovely religious garb.

No wonder in verse 7 Jesus says, you hypocrites. You're just like the people of God all down the centuries and their teachers who ignored the thrust and the challenge to the heart of God's word.

He quotes from Isaiah and says, that's just like you. He's talking about you. Previous verse in Isaiah speaks about the teachers and the prophets of the day being blind and asleep to the word of God.

Just as Jesus says these people are. Their lips are giving plenty of religious talk but their hearts are far away. Why?

[23 : 12] Because they didn't teach and hear God's word. They rather wanted to be under the authority and the commandments of men. See, it's easy to dress ourselves up as wonderfully spiritual people.

but in fact for hearts to be far away from God. Actually opposed to God. These pious laws you see were just loopholes that were allowing people to worship themselves while pretending to worship God.

And that's the key you see to all of this. Maybe none of us are guilty of that particular shameful deception. I sincerely hope not. Although I can tell you I heard this very week from a minister friend of mine who was telling me about that exact thing going on by somebody he knew of in his church who was trying to defraud a demented parent out of their money.

But I'm sure and I trust that none of us have done that. But can we really say we don't do similar kinds of things? Actually serving ourself while making us think that we're serving God trying to make others think that we're serving God.

So easy to do. Is our life really governed by a love mentality that loves God that puts God's word in total command and authority in our life?

[24 : 33] Or are we living with a loophole mentality that really is just loving ourself serving others perhaps but only so as to serve ourselves. See a loophole mentality only needs our lips but a love mentality needs our hearts and it's the response of our hearts that show if we've really grasped the gospel of God's grace what God gives to us in Christ and what he demands of us also.

If we really grasp that we rejoice to obey. We rejoice to obey Christ out of sheer love. But if we don't then we're just really trying to serve and protect ourselves.

We're looking for loopholes. I've done it a thousand times so have you. I remember I was just thinking back to when I was a student this week and my first year at Halls of Residence a Christian in second year adopted me and sought to mentor me and disciple me.

One of the things he said to me is look you've got to understand that if you're going to give money to God you've got to purpose to do it and what I think you should do is set aside your tithe whatever proportion you're going to give at the beginning of each term and what he did was open a separate bank account and he urged me to do the same and he said if you don't do that and you don't get the hang of this now later on in life you'll never be able to do it and I did and I thank God for his help and I do remember the challenge when I began to work and I looked at my payslip and all the tax came off and all the national insurance what I began to say to myself was hmm I'll make a proportion of the net money not the gross money then I can still feel good and I'm giving that proportion I'm still tithing but actually I'm saving a bit more for myself and you see what I was doing was looking for loopholes there was a great loophole wasn't it now I'm not trying to tell you how much of your money you should give to God or whether you should give it from your gross and your net but that's what that was what I was really trying to do was still feel good about myself and cheat God and there's a thousand million ways that we've all done that isn't that right we want to serve in church but are we serving God or are we really serving ourselves why is it for example when we need people to help with things it's always much much easier to get people to do high profile things that people notice and do things that make you dirty at times of the day that nobody's going to be there just a fact isn't it see it's all about motivation

God says I do this I want you to do this and we say well how can I do it with minimum possible cost to myself that's what I say I'm sure you probably do too do you remember when the man came to Jesus and said what must I do to be saved Jesus says what does the law say love God with all your heart and soul mind and strength and your neighbor is yourself so go and do it the man says alright but just tell me who my neighbor is in other words tell me who it isn't limit what I have to do tell me tell me the minimum I can do to get into heaven how can I limit the authority of God in my life you see Jesus tells him the story of the good Samaritan and you see that attitude is what the gospel and its priorities expose in us in our lives in our home life in our church life are we real authentic gospel driven people at home and together or is it a sham is it lips or hearts are we looking for loopholes for the protection of tradition or are we loving to love that brings us to this final section verses 10 to 20 the gospel you see always shines a light that exposes our hearts the gospel gets right under our skin and exposes our hearts and when it does it can cause offense because it exposes the real motivation underlying everything our words our actions instead of our apparent piety it shows up the truth it shows up what our heart motivation really is and that's a challenge that many apparently pious and exemplary church people and pastors find very offensive just like the Pharisees did verse 12 don't you know they were offended when they heard this what had offended these

[29 : 01] Bible loving Bible teaching people so much what had got under their skin that made them mad what was it that made them want to lynch the preacher when he challenged them in that way well Jesus had confronted them with the fact that all of their evangelical credentials notwithstanding at heart they were full of sin they needed to repent they needed to change their attitudes they needed to change their priorities they needed to submit to his sole authority and the authority and the priorities of his kingdom see verse 11 says it wasn't about outward show it's not what comes out of your mouth it's about the inner state of the heart it's what comes out of you that matters Jesus explains it absolutely clearly in verse 18 it's your hearts that matter and verse 19 is the problem your hearts aren't right they're rotten in your hearts you're breaking

God's commands all the time in thought in word in deed that's what's defiling you verse 20 those are the things that defile you and your hearts need to be transformed that's what Jesus is saying and they need to go on being transformed but you won't let your hearts be transformed because you won't submit to God's sole authority in your life you're protecting yourselves by your own traditions your own ways your own authority only God's living word can transform you and you're blocking it out with your religion your self-comforting religion your self-congratulating piety you're stopping God from changing you and friends that's so easy to do isn't it it's the kind of attitude that says to ourselves well we like to be part of an evangelical church we like to have a gospel message to challenge the outsider but we don't like having a double-barreled shotgun of the gospel pointed at our lives and hearts to challenge us because we've been

Christians for a long time and we're beyond that sort of thing we don't want to have our hearts accused of evil thoughts and slander and false witness and all these things we don't like our lives being challenged and pricked and exposed by the priorities of Christ's eternal kingdom do we we don't like God's priorities making demands on our time on our talents on our money in ways that make us all uncomfortable isn't that right I don't like that don't suppose you do but let me ask this do you expect to be called to repentance week by week as we hear God's word day by day as you read God's word do you expect God to be calling you to repentance do you expect to have to change your mind your attitudes and your thinking things to do with your life at work things to do with your home life things to do with our church life together do you expect to have to change our behavior our actions our thoughts our words and go on changing them well if not you see we're like the

Pharisees and very likely there's a lot of sham and pretense and self congratulation in our lives very likely then we've domesticated God's word with our tradition we've hidden it under an authority where we're actually in charge of the direction of our lives and we're very likely to get ruffled by a sermon that does challenge us and want to roast the preacher or get ruffled by what the Bible reading is really saying and want to get rid of the writer and get somebody else's notes that's what we do isn't it we take offense just like the Pharisees but friends look at verses 13 and 14 Jesus gives a very stern warning here doesn't he to Bible people who are actually blunting the spirit of God from doing its painful work of challenge in our hearts and Bible churches who do the same thing and fail to teach the uncomfortable truth and heed the uncomfortable challenges of gospel priorities verse 13 every plant like that that proves to be a fraud

God will root up verse 14 if all you want is comfortable evangelical platitudes and all you teach is that sort of thing then so be it says Jesus keep avoiding the challenge of the gospel of the kingdom by your comfortable ways and your self-made traditions keep blunting the penetration and the transforming power of God's word in your hearts to change you to mold you keep refusing to bow the knee to God alone and his authority alone and his priorities alone and I will leave you alone blind and hardened people with blind guides and you'll fall into a pit of irretrievable judgment friends I can't help but pass on to you what Jesus is saying to you and to me today he's saying that to all churches and to our church he's saying it to all

[34 : 41] Christians and to you and me he's saying that unless you're willing to change the attitudes in your heart and keep on changing them in conformity to his word alone unless you're willing to change your attitudes in your church life our church life and keep on changing it in submission to the priorities of the gospel of the kingdom unless we're willing to do that we are breaking the command of the gospel for the sake of ourselves and our traditions and we're making void we're making useless making dead the gospel itself that's what Jesus is saying to us so here's the question are we going to be offended by that this morning what's going to be our priority verse 35 everybody in the whole region hearing about Jesus and being brought to Jesus or verse 2 making sure everything in this church is just the way that we like it and everything in my life is just the way I want it to be it can't be both you see one or other hearts or lips one is real

Christianity and the other is sham churchianity Jesus and the gospel of his kingdom exposes our hearts and it makes demands of our hearts so I say to you and I say to myself this morning don't let's be offended by the painful probing and searching of God's word his gospel his priorities let us rather bow to his soul authority and let him and his gospel and the demands of his kingdom be the one director and leader in everything that we do lest our hearts should we find drifting far from him let's have verse 35 in our minds and our hearts that everyone in the region was brought to him and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment and as many as touched it were made well that's the priority of the gospel of the kingdom let's pray father forgive us when we are so easily offended at you and your word forgive us for the multiple layers of our own authority and protection that we build around our hearts and let us together encourage one another help one another urge one another to bow the knee to Jesus

Christ alone and to be taken up with the priorities of his eternal kingdom alone that at the last day we may be find rejoicing with all your people full of the joy of the glorious salvation that is ours in Christ alone so forgive us and help us we pray for Jesus Christ sake amen