

**“Beginning with the Heart”
(Matthew 15:1-20)
Pastor Peter Yi
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Introduction:

TNIV Matthew 15:1-20

¹ Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”

³ Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ ⁵ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’ ⁶ they are not to ‘honor their father or mother’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

⁸ “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”

¹⁰ Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into your mouth does not defile you, but what comes out of your mouth, that is what defiles you.”

¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”

¹³ He replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

¹⁵ Peter said, “Explain the parable to us.”

¹⁶ “Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them. ¹⁷ “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these defile you. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile you; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile you.”

When I was growing up in a Christian family, we had our share of religious rules. My parents, particularly my dad, had two sets of rules. Religious rules and other rules. And the religious rules were very important to him and he made us understand that they should be important to us. One particular rule that he emphasized more than any other rule was the keeping of the Sabbath. Even this phrase is erroneous because Christians don’t keep the Sabbath. If we did, we’d keep it like every orthodox Jew would keep it—from sundown Friday night to sundown on Saturday night. That was their Sabbath day. But just for starters that was wrong. You don’t find in the biblical evidence Christians worshipping on Saturday. Rather what you discover is very early in the formation of organized Christianity, they began meeting on what they called “the Lord’s Day”, Sunday, the day of the resurrection of the Lord. And it seems like the transition from Sabbath to Lord’s Day was so normal and natural that it’s not even mentioned.

So my father made it very clear early on in our upbringing, that the Sabbath Day was different from all other days. Here were some of the rules that he made for that day...and I think there was biblical evidence for most of these rules, but not for all.

1. *no studying, no homework (only to be broken if you have a major test on Monday)*
2. *no working (police, firemen, physicians and nurses. Working at the gas station)*
3. *no recreation (sports on Sunday? Forget about it)*
4. *no spending money (can a grandmother at church pay bus fare? getting in trouble for taking folks out to a movie)*
5. *Long elders' meeting are permitted*

Those were the rules that we grew up with. Now all of these rules my dad had no problem living up to. These were things he was already doing. He never worked his job on Sunday. He was pretty tight-fisted so he never really spent money on Sunday or any other day for that matter. He wasn't a student anymore so he never studied. And his idea of recreation was reading his Korean newspaper and falling asleep on the couch.

Notice what wasn't on the list. Cooking. The biblical Sabbath rules stated that there are to be no fires lit on the Sabbath as a rule against the work of cooking. It even began while the Israelites were collecting manna in the wilderness—double portions are to be collected on Fridays. Well, we all liked eating my mom's cooking, especially my dad, and so it was either eat her food or starve. And my mother was way too busy to prepare all of Sunday's meals on Saturday so she cooked on Sunday. Very convenient rule making.

And what I began to see him doing in the church as an elder of the church was to judge a person's spirituality and a person's dedication to God through the Sabbath rules. Those were the rules that if he were to take that test, he would have aced, and proven himself to be super spiritual. But what if we decided that the measure of spirituality is how you respect and love your wife and spend time with and mentor your children? He would have failed. The bible does in fact, use family as a measuring stick for real Christian maturity. In fact it is one of the measuring sticks for the so-called 'highest' position in the church, the elder.

What my father was doing was setting up an unbiblical standard of spirituality that was nothing short of legalism. Legalism is a hideous imitation of spirituality that measures your spirituality based on outward appearance, not inward transformation. Did you get that? Legalism is a hideous imitation of spirituality that measures your spirituality based on outward appearance, not inward transformation.

Now we have some rules for our kids. I'm hoping they are better than the rules my parents had with a better biblical basis and better reasons.

1. *Church attendance is very important. Corporate worship trumps the sniffles, studying for tests and sports programs.*
2. *You're not permitted to bring your handheld electronic games to church. It becomes a distraction and a temptation.*
3. *You do what you do because it is right, not because you're the pastor's kid.*

Those are some of our rules.

But, you see, everyone likes to paint the picture that makes them look better than they really are. What you will see yourself doing, and I do it too, is measuring spirituality by what you do well. So, if your thing is bible reading, then you'll measure it by bible reading. If it's church attendance, then you'll measure it my church attendance. If it's the manner of speech, then speech will be your measuring stick. All of us do this. And I'm not just talking about Christians. Even the person

who hates church and Christians because we're all hypocrites, lives the same way. They too make the rules to be in their favor.

So what Jesus does in today's parable, in an encounter with hyper-religious people, is destroy the myth that true spirituality is about obeying rules. Instead he throws that kind of thinking out the door and says **true spirituality begins with the heart**.

Now, just so we make sure we're all on the same page when we are talking about the heart, here's what it doesn't mean. It is not a biological term—strongest muscle, 4 chambers, pumps blood. I think you already knew that.

Also, think of how you and I use the word heart. When you're talking about life dreams, career changes, potential love relationships, we say things like "what is your heart telling you?" "just follow your heart." That Hollywood, fluffy, completely misguided and subjective garbage is not what the bible means when it uses the same word.

The heart in the bible is the center of your being. It's where mind, spirit, emotions, and will meet. Here's how a bible dictionary defines it—as "the inner life", "the center of the personality", "the place in which God reveals himself to people", "it's the place of genuine transformation", "it's the center of spirituality", "the heart is who you really are"

Here are a few passages in the Bible that speaks of the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7

*But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things **human** beings look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the **heart**."*

Proverbs 23:12

*Apply your **heart** to instruction and your ears to words of knowledge.*

Jeremiah 17:8-10

⁹ *The **heart** is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.*

Who can understand it?

¹⁰ *"I the LORD search the **heart** and examine the mind, to reward everyone according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve."*

Romans 10:9

*If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your **heart** that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

I hope you are getting a clearer picture of what the heart is.

Because true moral corruption, true transformation, facing your demons, true meeting and engaging with the love and forgiveness of God begins at the heart, it is a futile to endeavor to try to know God or try to change ourselves in any other way.

You and I must open our hearts to God and his Spirit. We must, at the heart level, allow the Word of God to penetrate, like a long rain soaking into dry and cracked soil. In all of our spiritual exercises from worship, to prayer, to fellowship, to holiness...whatever it is, the heart is the starting point and the focal point. So we should ask God things like,

“God, help me today to worship you from the heart. Awaken my heart, my affections to worship you.”

“God, please check and see if there is wickedness and sin in my heart. Cleanse it through Jesus.”

“God this anger, this disappointment, this immaturity, this self-centeredness, this hardness, this dullness, this apathy—please begin to change these things in my heart.”

“Jesus, I’m not sure if you’re the real deal, but if you are, come, meet me in my heart.”

“God, today’s baptism/confirmation, today, I give you my heart.”

“Jesus, the bread and the wine, the body and the blood...nourish me, meet me, at the heart.”

Let’s do that right now.

