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The Blind Leading the Blind

*These people draw near to Me with their mouth,
and honor Me with their lips,
but their heart is far from Me.*

—Jehovah God

By this time Jesus' ministry is successful and well-known: "the blind see, the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Mt 11:5). The people are wondering aloud, "Could this be the Son of David?" (Mt 12:23). Unfortunately, many scribes and Pharisees are jealous of His popularity and want to undermine His credibility; this is why they have recently suggested that His power to cast out evil spirits comes from "the ruler of the demons" instead of from God (Mt 12:24). After this, some of the scribes and Pharisees actively become His adversaries, seeking any religious offense for which they might accuse Jesus.

While Jesus is living in Capernaum ("village of repentance/comfort"), His adversaries come and accuse Him and His disciples of being "unclean." A delegation of scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem asks: "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread" (Mt 15:1-2). Yet again, a religious delegation levels another charge against Jesus and His disciples,

this time complaining that they are ignoring the traditions taught by their religious leaders. Their charge prompts a discussion concerning this question: “what makes someone ceremonially unclean before God?” (“Unclean” basically means that one is unfit to serve God).

Jesus answers them with a question:

Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, “Honor your father and your mother”; and, “He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.” But you say, “Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God’—then he need not honor his father or mother” (Mt 15:3-6).

Jesus is referring to the common practice among rich Pharisees to bequeath all of their wealth to the temple (though the actual transfer of wealth does not happen until their death). After bequeathing his property, whenever that Pharisee’s parents need help, he makes an excuse (for neglecting them) similar to the following: “I have already given everything I own as a gift to God; I cannot take it back from God and give it to you.”

Responding to the charge against His disciples, Jesus counters with a more serious charge: these Pharisees, who are supposed to be leaders of God’s people, are, in fact, disregarding the Word of God in order to follow their own traditions. Jesus explains:

Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying:

These people draw near to Me with their mouth,
And honor Me with their lips,
But their heart is far from Me.
And in vain they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men

(Mt 15:6-9; cf. Ps 78:36-37; Isa 29:13).

The Pharisees are in error because they have allowed their man-made traditions to have the same authority as the Word of God; they “teach as doctrine the commandments of men” and justify their traditions by saying, “we are honoring God.” Quite the opposite is true: their error of giving priority to their man-

made traditions undermines the authority of the Word of God; putting it bluntly, they are disobeying God.

Jesus turns His attention to the people and says: “Hear and understand: Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man” (Mt 15:10-11). Now Jesus is informing the people that it is not necessary to follow man-made religious traditions, such as always washing one’s hands, in order to be ceremonially clean before God. Indeed, the Pharisees are absorbed with the idea that the dirt that goes into a man makes him unclean before God, but Jesus wants them to consider that the dirt that comes out of their mouths springs from their unclean hearts.

“Then His disciples came and said to Him, ‘Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?’” (Mt 15:12). Yes, Jesus knows. Ironically, He offends the Pharisees by purposefully contradicting their tradition just as they offend God by contradicting His commandments.

Jesus then gives two parables; the first seems to refer to a recent parable concerning seed which God “has not planted” and the second parable concerns blind leaders:

Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch (Mt 15:13-14).

By mentioning “blindness,” Jesus directs their attention to the Law of Moses, which prohibits anyone who is unclean, having a physical defect such as blindness, from serving God (Lev 21:16-23). Calling them “blind,” Jesus really offends the Jewish leaders by indicating that they are unfit to serve God.

“Then Peter answered and said to Him, ‘Explain this parable to us’” (Mt 15:15). Peter asks because he wants to understand the parable. Just recently, Jesus has informed His disciples that they must become discipled scribes, experts concerning the Kingdom from Heaven. The accounts in Matthew and Mark provide a further explanation of Jesus’ teaching about what makes one unclean:

Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods? . . . What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man (Mk 7:18-23; cf. Mt 15:16-20).

(Consider this question: “Is Jesus applying the Old Covenant Law or the New Covenant Law?”¹)

Back to the parables, Jesus is proclaiming divine judgment against these failed leaders who are following their own traditions instead of obeying God’s commandments. Think for a moment about the earlier parable of “Tares Sown Among the Wheat,” in which the Son of Man planted the good seed and the devil planted the tares. Now apply this parable’s lesson about the tares: these failed leaders have not been “planted” by God. Concerning the tares, Jesus said to “leave [the seed which God did not plant] alone,” but here He says that these blind leaders will be left alone for a while, until God judges them by uprooting them.

Continuing His proclamation of judgment, Jesus switches to the second parable. The second parable describes the religious leaders as blind men, and those who follow them as also being blind, with the result that all of them will go astray, off the path, falling into the ditch. In Luke’s account, Jesus asks, “Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the ditch?” (Lk 6:39). Furthermore, blindness makes these leaders and those who follow them unclean. Why is this matter of uncleanness, the focus of this discussion, so important? Why does Jesus take the time to explain what makes a believer “unclean” in God’s eyes?

¹ The Old Covenant had many commandments restricting the Israelites’ diet which, if broken, would make them unclean. Here, contradicting the Old Law, Jesus states that there is no food (not even dirt) which can make one unclean. Jesus does not apply the standard of the Old Law but, instead, applies the standard of the New Law, which concerns what is happening in one’s heart.

These Pharisees (and all these Jewish believers) are looking forward to the day when the Messiah will restore the Kingdom of God. In Isaiah, God foretells that the Promised Land will be restored, becoming like the Garden of Eden, and God Himself will dwell in Zion²: “And the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. . . . They shall see the glory of the LORD, The excellency of our God” (Isa 35:1-2). God says that at that time He will bring salvation to His people: “Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, With the recompense of God; He will come and save you” (Isa 35:4). God describes the healing which His salvation shall bring:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.
Then the lame shall leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the dumb sing.
For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness,
And streams in the desert (Isa 35:5-6).

Then God describes the Highway of Holiness, by which believers will travel to Zion but which the “unclean” will not be allowed to “pass over”:

A highway shall be there, and a road,
And it shall be called the Highway of Holiness.
The unclean shall not pass over it,
But it shall be for others.
Whoever walks the road, although a fool,
Shall not go astray.
. . . .
But the redeemed shall walk there,
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
And come to Zion with singing,
With everlasting joy on their heads.
They shall obtain joy and gladness,
And sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isa 35:8-10).

One reason the concept of “uncleanness” is important to Jesus’ audience is because they know Isaiah’s prophecy that the

² Zion is the poetic name for Jerusalem when God is living there and ruling over His people (qualifying it as the Kingdom of God).

believer who is “unclean” will not be allowed to travel on the Highway of Holiness.³ If someone is blind,⁴ or unclean in any other way, he will be excluded from traveling on this highway to Zion and will miss out on the joy and gladness to be found there.

Jesus then explains the goal of discipleship: “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is made complete is like his teacher” (Lk 6:40; cf. Mt 10:24-25). The Greek word, *katartizō*, translated “made complete” (to make sound, restore, or mend [e.g., a net]; to fit, equip, or complete), conveys the idea of “restoration.” This word is used to describe fishermen mending their nets (Mt 4:21; Mk 1:19); it also is used to describe the restoration of a brother overtaken by a fault (Gal 6:1). In the New Testament, this word is additionally used to describe maturation: of praise (Mt 21:16); of a disciple (Lk 6:40; 2Co 13:11; 1Th 3:10; Heb 13:21; 1Pe 5:10); of a body (1Co 1:10). The goal of discipleship is restoration: to mend the faults of a new disciple and bring him to maturity “like his teacher,” ultimately, “[to] be mature, even as your Father in Heaven is mature” (Mt 5:48).

Having pointed out the blindness of the Pharisees and their disciples, and having warned about the possibility of becoming blind by following human tradition, Jesus uses this opportunity to teach His own disciples how proper discipleship can restore and mature them. In the context of discipleship, Jesus tells them:

³ The “Highway of Holiness” seems to be a metaphor for Jesus’ “new way,” formally called “the Law of Christ” (Gal 6:2), given in the New Covenant (Mt 5-7) which Jesus handed down to be God’s New Law for His chosen people. John the Baptist was “the voice crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God’” (Isa 40:3; cf. Mt 3:3; 11:10; Mk 1:3; Lk 1:76; 3:4; 7:27; Jn 1:23). Answering Thomas’ question concerning how they will know the way, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by Me” (Jn 14:4-6). The “way” of the Lord is mentioned often (Ac 9:2; 13:10; 16:17; 18:24-26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22; Heb 10:20; 2Pe 2:2, 15, 21). Possible first uses of “the [new] way” are in Mt 7:13-14; 21:31 and Mk 10:53.

⁴ Interestingly, the Old Covenant disqualifies someone from service for blindness and other physical defects; in contrast, the New Covenant does not disqualify for physical defects (Mt 5:29-30) but for spiritual defects of the heart.

Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you (Lk 6:37-38; cf. Mt 7:1-2).

At first glance, in Matthew, the warning not to judge another believer appears to be unrelated to discipleship. How are the subjects of judging and discipling related? In order to disciple another, one must mend what is broken, restore the other from his faults, and help the new disciple to mature so that he becomes more like Jesus Christ. In Matthew, the larger context of these verses is the Law of Christ (Mt 5-7), which details Christ's commands to those who would be His disciples. In Luke, Jesus' teaching about judging another believer is in the middle of a discussion about discipleship (Lk 6:37-42) and describes how judging others relates to forgiveness and generosity, which should be characteristics of His disciples.

First of all, one who would disciple another must be careful about the way he judges other believers. The idea of "judging" here mostly concerns making decrees, and this is a warning that one should be careful about what one says, because what one has said about his brother might one day also be said about him. Secondly, the idea of "condemning" concerns a pronouncement of guilt. One should be careful, especially when he does not have the office and responsibility of a judge, not to proclaim that another is guilty of an offense, because one day he might likewise be declared guilty by the divine Judge. (Jesus might be referring specifically to those Pharisees who are trying to find fault with Him).

Thirdly, and on a positive note, Jesus says to forgive your brother, and you also will be forgiven. Remember, Jesus includes the importance of forgiving your brother when He teaches His commandment to pray (Mt 6:5-15; cf. Mt 18:35; Mk 11:25; Lk 17:3-4; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). Lastly, Jesus suggests that generosity is the best way to show concern for your brother. Being generous will teach one's disciples to treat others

generously (even during the times when one might not deserve such kindness).

Fourthly, one who disciples others should judge his own faults, so that he does not become a hypocrite. Concerning judging one's brother, both Matthew and Luke give virtually the same report of Jesus' illustration of a hypocrite who tries to restore a brother's sight by removing a speck of chaff from his eye:

And how can you see the chaff in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the beam in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me cast out the chaff from your eye"; and look, a beam is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First cast out the beam from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to cast out the chaff from your brother's eye (Mt 7:3-5; Lk 6:41-42).

Certainly this illustration is a farce worthy of "Abbott and Costello" or "The Three Stooges." Abbott has a small piece of debris in his eye, but Costello has a beam in his eye. Every time Costello approaches to help Abbott, the beam in his eye hits Abbott on the head. In this passage, Jesus gives a definition of the word "hypocrite"⁵: one who condemns another while being guilty of the same, and possibly greater, offense. Certainly, a beam in a believer's eye would make him somewhat blind and would hinder him in his endeavor of discipling his brother, not to mention that removing a beam from an eye would be much easier than removing a speck.

Late in his ministry, Peter writes to those he has discipled to encourage them to grow to maturity in their faith, and he warns them that, if they are not becoming mature, they might develop blindness:

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is

⁵ Cf. Mt 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 15:7; 16:3; 22:18; 23:13-15, 23-29; 24:51; Mk 7:6; Lk 6:42; 11:44; 12:56; 13:15.

shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins (2Pe 1:5-9).

In a similar way, the apostle John warns his disciples: “If we say that we are in fellowship with Him, when we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not produce the truth” (1Jn 1:6). John continues: “He who is hating his brother is in darkness and is walking in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (1Jn 2:11). He who has eyes to see, let him see!