

Life Group Questions

Sep. 24th, 2023

From Hands to Heart – Pastor Vinh Doan - **Matthew 15:1-20**

To the Life Group leader: thank you for your ministry leading this Life Group. **Take time to review the questions, selecting those you believe will be most helpful for your group study.** You will not have time to use all the questions. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you lead, as you select questions, and as you guide the discussion.

Note from Pastor Jonathan

Firstly, I know many of Life Groups are at different places, so I've formatted the commentary and questions to hopefully make it easy for leaders to easily see what they can use. There will be three types of questions:




Study the passage - Head



Reflect on God's truth - Heart



Go out and apply - Hands

For those that want to know more about a topic, there are also portions called  **Diving Deeper**.

Secondly, thank you for volunteering your time to serve our Willingdon family. I've talked to many leaders and they all express how important you all are to the church. Without leaders, we wouldn't have any Life Groups. My role at Willingdon Church is to support, equip, and care for you. Please let me know how I can do that!

Thirdly, this is all a work in progress. I'm going to continue developing these questions and commentary to better serve you. Please be patient and pray that God will give me wisdom.

Thank you,

Pastor Jonathan Hsieh

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Reconnect

Come together with these preliminary questions:

- How has God gifted you to serve Him?
- How will you serve Him this fall at Willingdon Church?
- Where has God placed you in the city? What is your role there?

Open in Prayer

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the text, the questions, and each other.

Message Recap Questions

Review the message using these questions

1. What stood out to you most in this week's message?
2. What was the most meaningful thing you heard in the message? Why?
3. What questions are still lingering?

Questions



1. Why do the Pharisees care so much about traditions?

What are the pros or cons of strong traditions?



2. How did the Pharisees use tradition to break God's commandment?



3. Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13. What is Jesus' problem with the Pharisees?



4. Why is it important to separate God-made traditions from man-made traditions?

What are ways we can do that?



5. When do you blame others for your own sin? Take time to confess and ask for forgiveness.



6. How can you help others find hope?

Commentary and Questions

Jesus and the disciples ended up in Gennesaret last week. Pharisees travel from Jerusalem to confront Jesus. That trip was around 160km on foot and would've taken over a week. They really want to shut Jesus down.



1. Why do the Pharisees care so much about traditions?

What are the pros or cons of strong traditions?

On the plus side, the Jewish people cared a lot about following God. They knew God takes holiness and obedience seriously. When God told them to do this or not do that, they wanted to be certain. By Jesus' time, many religious scholars got lost in the technicalities of the law and forgot about the main purpose. Check out **Diving Deeper: Traditions over Truth** for more details.



Diving Deeper: Traditions Over Truth

God told the Israelites to not work on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:12-17). What is work? Traditions formed and things got complicated. Pharisaic style traditions eventually evolved to define 39 types of work that are forbidden on the Sabbath, called the 39 Melachot (https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/102032/jewish/The-39-Melachot.htm). Why 39? It's complicated (<https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-textual-source-for-the-39-melachot-of-shabbat>). You can see this kind of thinking in Jesus' day, when picking grain and healing were forbidden (Matthew 12:1-8). Every mundane task was potentially work and that made people worried. God's purpose for Sabbath was to give people rest so they could worship and trust Him. It was a gift to help people flourish (Mark 2:27).

Modern Orthodox Jews have continued these traditions. Since tearing toilet paper is forbidden on the Sabbath (<https://outorah.org/p/74173/>), bidet manufacturer Brondell provides Sabbath-friendly options (<https://www.brondell.com/healthy-living-blog/brondell-products-for-secular-living/>). Also don't unclog a toilet on the Sabbath, get a Gentile to do it for you (<https://outorah.org/p/76469/>).

To be honest, it's funny imagining devout scholars having heated debates over what toilet pleases God. But it's also tragic. God gave the Jewish people the gifts of "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (Romans 9:1-5) as a map to Jesus (John 5:39-40) but they tried to make their own way to salvation (Romans 10:1-4).

Growing up in Florida, I remember the drive from Pinellas Park to Disney World. My brother and I would be so excited watching the highway signs. They would say DISNEY WORLD XX MILES and the numbers would get smaller until DISNEY WORLD NEXT EXIT. We would lose our minds because we were moments away from the Happiest Place on Earth™. But what if we kept driving because we thought the signs were the real fun? We'd be crazy. The Florida DOT built those signs to point people to Disney World. Nobody drives up I-4 to look at signs!



Diving Deeper: Hand Washing

Jesus's disciples are breaking the tradition of handwashing. God's Law had rules for priests performing sacrifices or other specific scenarios (Exodus 30:17-21; Leviticus 15:11; Deuteronomy 21:1-9). Pharisees said those laws apply to *all* Jews and passed their own interpretations down through oral laws. They collected these oral laws into what's called the Mishnah, compiled around 200 AD. There's a section mostly about handwashing called *Yadayim* ("hands") (https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Yadayim.1). If you read it, you'll see many arbitrary statements by rabbis. I don't know what scenario led to this law, but a monkey can pour water for ritual purification (Mishnah Yadayim 1:5). Unfortunately, owning a monkey is illegal in British Columbia (<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/plants-animals-ecosystems/cas>).



2. How did the Pharisees use tradition to break God's commandment?

Jesus quotes the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12), "Honor your father and your mother..." He also references Exodus 21:17, "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death." Treating parents right was a big deal, including caring for them.

The Pharisees found a loophole. They could pledge their money or belongings to the temple, meaning when they died, it would go to the temple. When their parents needed help, they could say, "I'd love to support you, but I promised I would give my money to God." Although their wealth was supposedly dedicated to God, they could still use it for whatever they wanted.



3. Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13. What is Jesus' problem with the Pharisees?

Isaiah was written roughly 700 years before Jesus was born. The Pharisees' hypocritical attitude was nothing new. If Isaiah were there, he would say the same thing he said way back then.

They worshiped and praised God with their words, but their attitudes showed they didn't care about God. Imagine a husband that says flattering, romantic things to his wife, but chases other women. Those romantic gestures would only make a bad situation worse.

The Pharisees also added their own rules and forced people to follow them. Instead of focusing on God, the people were forced to focus on the rules. Following God became burdensome instead of life-giving (Matthew 23:1-4).



4. Why is it important to separate God-made traditions from man-made traditions? What are ways we can do that?

The Christian church has lots of traditions. Many started with good intentions, but some became harmful. These traditions led people away from God. There were people called Reformers that wanted to reform the church and bring it back to what God wanted. They used the "five *solas*" to help them figure out what traditions were good and what were bad. I think they can also help us analyze our own traditions today, too. I've given a modern example for each.

1. Is this tradition based on God's Word? (*Sola Scriptura*)

It just has to be this way. Many churches split over what kind of music to sing on Sunday: hymns with piano or contemporary songs with guitar. Traditionalists claimed that their way was the

only way. Most English hymns were written over 1700 years after Jesus died and the disciples never heard of piano. The traditionalists created extra rules God never intended. It's good to make sure the theology of the song is biblical, but God doesn't give rules about instruments. Before we say we *must* do church a certain way, we need to check if God agrees.

2. Does this tradition point to Jesus' work on the cross? (Solus Christus)

This is Pastor X's church! Christians should be proud of the men and women God has used to grow the church, but sometimes this becomes unhealthy. For example, we may give leaders too much credit. We may turn a leader into the church's savior (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). "Pastor X is the reason our church is so big!" Or people think they need that leader to connect with God, as if they have exclusive access to God (1 Timothy 2:5-6). "My prayers aren't as good as Elder Y's, so I'll get them to pray for me." Many Christians think second-hand spirituality is sufficient so they don't build their own relationship with Jesus (John 15:1-4). "I don't need to learn how to study the Bible, because this teacher does it for me." Jesus is the only VIP and we should all point everyone to Him (1 Corinthians 3:5-7; Colossians 1:8).

3. Are we relying on this tradition to make us right with God? (Sola Fide)

They're not doing it right! It's easy to judge people by what we see. What are they wearing? How do they speak? Are they involved in enough ministries? Who are their friends? When we focus too much on externalities, we give people the wrong impression that our salvation is based on how we act. We become like the Pharisees, looking great on the outside but dead on the inside (Matthew 23:25-28). Many parents fall into the trap of thinking their children are right with God simply because they follow a Christianity checklist. "But the Bible isn't mainly about you and what you should be doing. It's about God and what He has done." (*Give Them Grace: Dazzling Your Kids with the Love of Jesus*, Elyse M. Fitzpatrick). When we focus on the outward appearance, we forget that we are saved by faith in Jesus (Romans 10:9-10). We should prioritize people's faith over their appearance.

4. Does this tradition make us appreciate God's grace? (Sola Gratia)

Motivation through guilt. We were dead in our sins, but Jesus gave us new life and made us part of His family. We have that and more because of God's grace (Ephesians 2). Confession time. Even though I would say I was saved by grace, my ministry didn't reflect that. I really wanted people to serve and be active in the church. I thought that if I used a few slices of Scripture served with a big helping of guilt ("If you don't serve, you're letting Jesus down!" "Fine, go hang out with your friends while we're doing God's work!"), people would change. I forgot that everything is God's grace. My awareness of my sin, my faith in Jesus, my changed life, my desire to serve Him, and more were all because of God's grace (Ephesians 2). I should have poured out the grace that God gave me (Luke 7:47). It's by God's grace that I know better now. Are we motivating people with God's grace? Are we praying for God to show His grace on our church members and community?

5. Does this tradition glorify God and God alone? (Soli Deo Gloria)

Other churches are competition. We want more people to come to Jesus and be part of the family. But it's hard if other churches are taking our potential church members! "Did you hear what that church did? We got to do bigger and better or we'll lose to them." "I almost got my neighbor to come to Willingdon, but that church down the street got to them first!" When we have this attitude, we forget that all churches belong to God. As long as those churches are leading people to love God and love people, we should be happy. We don't build up Willingdon Church for the glory of Willingdon Church. We build up Willingdon Church for the glory of God.

5. When do you blame others for your own sin? Take time to confess and ask for forgiveness.

The 20th century was a monumental time of change for so-called Christian countries. The sexual revolution, New Age spirituality, foreign religions, and more threatened to destroy the church. Christians adopted a fortress mentality to build a fence like the Pharisees. We must protect our church and our children from outside evil to keep us pure.

But as Jesus notes here, impurity doesn't come from the outside world. It comes from our hearts. "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick..." (Jeremiah 17:9a). We think that if we keep our church to Christians that think like we do, we'll have the perfect church. But James tells us that quarrels and fights come from "your passions at war *within* you" (James 4:1). Although external temptations can make things worse, our biggest problem is inside of ourselves.

For example, there are many voices in Christianity against leggings or other form fitting clothing for women. The logic goes that if women wore modest clothing, the men won't stumble. But unsurprisingly, men will still lust no matter what women wear. I was a teen boy in the 90s. Most girls in my school wore baggy clothing. I can say that it didn't stop any of us guys from thinking impure thoughts. Even Islamic countries where women cover up have prevalent pornography usage

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348885276_Pornography_Use_Prevalence_and_Associated_Factors_in_Arab_Countries_A_Multinational_Cross-Sectional_Study_of_15027_Individuals). In this case, lustful boys will be lustful boys no matter what.

It's easy to blame girls for my impure thoughts, but I have to admit my own sinful desires and go to Jesus for forgiveness and healing (1 John 1:9). As I raise my son, I'll have to teach him to do the same.

Maybe you raise your voice and/or saying really mean things in an argument. You justify it by saying, "Well, they said this!" or "They did that first!" If Willingdon Church allowed pastors to gamble, I'd bet every husband and wife have used that excuse before.

Maybe you blame your workload for not spending time with God. Your friends are always getting you to go hang out so you don't have time to pray. You're too tempted by social media every time you pick up your phone to read the Bible.

6. How can you help others find hope?

Many people are stuck in sin and want to find freedom. They've sterilized their environment of temptations. They're careful about where they go on the Internet, but those websites keep pulling them

back. They avoid bars or parties, but it's impossible to avoid beer commercials on TV. They try to be a nice person and force a smile, but they still lose their temper on their kids way too often.

Perhaps worst of all, they've tried to copy Christians. They attend service when they can. They try to read the Bible and pray. But it's not working.

They need to know that they can't change themselves. Following rules can't help them either. They need to know that even though they constantly do the things they regret, God loves them (Romans 5:6-10). They need to know that Jesus died for their sins so they can be forgiven. They need to know that only the Holy Spirit can clean their hearts and someday make them completely free of sin.

Who can you share this good news with?

I know this can be hard, so I want to encourage you to share your how God is working in you with your Life Group.

Choose Your Next Step

What next step will you commit to for the upcoming week (and beyond)?

Closing Prayer

A closing prayer is an effective way to point people back to our Loving Father as they seek to apply their new learnings throughout the week. Ask group members to share what they sense God calling them to. Pray for each other and commit to continue to do so during the week as people step out in obedience to God's leading.