

# Matthew 15:1-9

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-15/matthew-151-9/>

*The Pharisees return to attack Jesus with a loaded question. Jesus flips the question on its head and demonstrates through an example and a prophecy how the Pharisees think more of their traditions than they do the law of God or their parents.*

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in [Mark 7:1-13](#).

Matthew continues his narration of the life and ministry of *Jesus* the Messiah. He concluded his previous passage recording how *Jesus* was miraculously healing people in the land at Gennesaret in the district of Galilee ([Matthew 14:34-36](#)) following His feeding five thousand men and walking on water. Matthew uses the word, *Then*, to likely indicate a small change in time or place, to show that what happened next was not part of the same scene. John actually reports this conversation between *Jesus* and those who found Him in Capernaum in [John 6:25-71](#).

*Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus.* Matthew tells us that these were not the local *Pharisees*. They were *from* the capital city of *Jerusalem*. It is about eighty miles from *Jerusalem* to the north shore of Galilee. It may have been the local Galilean *Pharisees* who confronted *Jesus* in [Matthew 12](#). If so, it's possible that after their humiliation they went to *Jerusalem* to inform *some* of their more seasoned brethren to challenge *Jesus* this time. The *Pharisees* were religious teachers and the gatekeepers of Jewish culture and customs. Their domain was the synagogues. *Scribes*, experts in the law, also *came from Jerusalem to Jesus* with them.

They *came to trap Jesus*. And they attempted to do so publicly ([Matthew 15:10](#)). The substance of their accusation was similar to what the *Pharisees* previously charged against Him. Both attempted to find fault with *Jesus* for His disciples' behavior.

Previously, when the *Pharisees* confronted *Jesus* earlier they were direct. "Look, *Your disciples* do not do what is lawful to do on the Sabbath" ([Matthew 12:2](#)). Now in chapter 15 these *Pharisees from Jerusalem* were being more

crafty in setting their trap. *Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders?*

Their accusation was buried within a loaded question that was framed in such a way that it assumed guilt. It was a question designed to manufacture a fault. If *Jesus answered* their loaded question directly *He* would admit that His *disciples* were *tradition* breakers. This would play in the *Pharisees'* and *scribes'* hands.

*The tradition of the elders* was not *the commandment of God*. It was an oral tradition created by religious leaders, and instituted following Judah's return from the Babylonian exile. *The tradition* was meant to serve as an extra hedge of protection to ensure people followed God's commandments. Presumably the thought was, "We don't want another exile to happen, so let's make sure we rigorously keep God's commands." Its initial intent was to establish a manmade moral boundary around God's moral code to prevent Israel from ever seriously transgressing God's law again. The problem was that this *tradition* grew to become more sacred in the eyes of the *Pharisees and scribes* than *the commandment of God* or His people it was meant to protect. It had become an end unto itself. And, as with most institutions, the threat to the power of the *elders* seems to be the primary concern.

The *Pharisees* followed up their loaded question with a specific accusation against *Jesus's disciples*. *For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread*. There was no divine *commandment* to *wash hands* before eating *bread*, but the *elders* added this *tradition*.

*Jesus's* response is full and explosive. *He* begins with a question that is even more loaded than the *Pharisees'*. *He* cites an example of how *they transgress God's law*. *He* calls them *hypocrites* and exposes *them* as pretenders. And *He* concludes His response with a prophecy.

Instead of answering their loaded question directly, *Jesus* swatted aside their false framing and asked them a loaded question of His own. In the process *He* reframed the issue entirely.

*Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?*

Unlike the *Pharisees'* accusation which was subtle and indirectly aimed at *Jesus's* authority through the actions of His *disciples*, *Jesus* goes right after

the *Pharisees* with this question. *He* accuses them directly and begins His question “*Why do you yourselves...*” *He* also lays a more serious charge against the *Pharisees*. *They* accused Him of breaking their *tradition*. *He* accused them of violating *God’s commandment*. And at the same time, *He* also brilliantly dismissed their charge by functionally saying that *your tradition* is used as an excuse to *transgress God’s word*.

*Jesus* then explained to *them* (and everyone listening) how *they* abused their *tradition to transgress the word of God*. *He* achieves this by citing one of the Ten Commandments. *For God* commanded, “*Honor your father and mother*” ([Deuteronomy 5:16](#)). *Jesus* follows up this *commandment* by quoting the law to emphasize its importance, and “*he who speaks evil against Father or Mother is to be put to death*” ([Exodus 21:17](#); [Leviticus 20:9](#)).

Then *Jesus* made His charge: *But you* practice and teach, “*Whoever says to his father or mother* in their time of need, ‘*Whatever I have that would have been able to help you has already been given to God* through my gifts to the synagogue. *Sorry Father and Mother, I have nothing left give to you that would help you* because *I* am a righteous giver according to *the tradition of the elders*. The elders’ tradition allowed people to say “*The money I would have given to help my parents is the money I gave to the synagogue.*” (*Jesus* does not mention that the money that went to the synagogue also ended up benefitting the elders.)

*Jesus* is accusing them by saying “*You* teach and practice that this dishonorable son is excused from honoring *the commandment to honor your father and mother* in this way.” The elders have provided a work-around, so that people could disobey the Ten Commandments in favor of the *tradition of the elders*.

*Jesus* continued His scathing rebuke by branding the *Pharisees* for what *they* were—*You hypocrites*. A hypocrite was the Greek term for an “actor.” This term publicly labeled *them* as pretenders and moral fakes.

Finally, *He* used a prophecy from Isaiah that summed up their vanity.

*Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:  
This people honors Me with their lips,  
but their heart is far from Me.  
But in vain do they worship Me,  
Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.*

Jesus was quoting *Isaiah 29:13*. In this context, *this people* refers to the *Pharisees and scribes*. The expression *honor Me with their lips*, means that *they* speak as if they really loved and *honor God*. But their love for *God* is merely lip-service. *They* do not love *God* from the *heart*. *Their heart* and its desires are *far from God*. *Their heart* is for the esteem of man and the kingdoms of this world.

The result is that their *worship of God* is to no effect. It does not please or move *God*. It is *in vain*. Their *worship*, no doubt, includes the money, service, or assistance they chose to *give* to their synagogues instead of helping their *Father and Mother*.

*Jesus* finishes quoting *Isaiah's* prophecy teaching as *doctrines the precepts of men*. The *Pharisees* acted as though their *traditions* and *precepts* superseded divine doctrine. No set of *doctrines* were more divine than the Ten Commandments which were given to Moses by *God* Himself on Mount Sinai, and yet they excused their transgressions because of their own *precepts*.

*Jesus* had completely upended the *Pharisees'* trap and accusation against Him. *He* flipped their charge of allowing His *disciples* to violate their *traditions* with an even heavier accusation of His own. *He* showed how *they* regularly disobeyed the commandment to *honor your Father and Mother* by using their traditions of giving money to their synagogues as an excuse to short their parents during their season of need.

His point was emphatically made. And it was in public. Matthew does not relay the *Pharisees'* response. *They* may have just walked away defeated, humiliated and embittered toward *Jesus*. This can be inferred by their later actions, in which they committed blasphemy, according to their own definition, in order to induce Pilate to crucify *Jesus*, when they said "We have no king but Caesar" ([John 19:15](#)).

### **Biblical Text:**

**15:1-9** Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." And He answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been

given to God," he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:

**'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,  
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.  
'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,  
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.'**"