

# THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

## The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

### STUDY FOUR

## Spiritual Blind Spots

*Matthew 14:34–15:20*

*All people are spiritually blind from birth. Those who are spiritually blind may have excellent physical eyesight but be in complete darkness spiritually. They're perishing. Their minds are darkened because they don't believe in the gospel. The Holy Spirit must make spiritual light dawn in people's lives to bring them to believe in Christ.*

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

**W**HAT kind of tradition gets the fiercest devotion? You guessed it . . . *the religious kind*. People across the world and across time have accused, fought, split, and died—all to uphold their sacred habits and practices. It comes as no surprise then that Jesus' fiercest opponents were those who sensed Him challenging their deeply held religious traditions.

The Pharisees obsessed over their traditions every minute of every day. *Even their rules had rules!* The foundation of their laws originated with Moses. But they had buried the law of Moses under a mountain of their own codes, which they abused to show themselves spiritually superior. Their fellow Jews could hardly stand under this impossible load of “pious” expectations.

While the Pharisees *seemed* closest to God, Jesus warned that they were the farthest from Him. Why? Because they put God on their face but not in their heart. In this study, we will join the crowd and witness one of the most intense disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees—one where He uncovered their shameful hypocrisy and taught the supreme value of inward purity.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

## Spiritual Blind Spots

*Matthew 14:34–15:20*



### PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before you begin searching the Scriptures, take some time to peer into your own heart and ask God to use His Word to lead you on His perfect path. Use the words of *Psalms 139:23–24*:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
Point out anything in me that offends you,  
and lead me along the path of everlasting life.*



### TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The Pharisees were one of many Jewish sects in Jesus' day. Believe it or not, they actually garnered a large following. They concerned themselves with an all-consuming question: *How should we Jews respond to the Roman occupation of our land Judea?* Their answer?

### FOLLOW GOD'S LAW

Most faithful Jews would have agreed and seen this as a solid answer. For example, look at what God told Moses in *Deuteronomy 28:25–26, 36–37, and 43* as a warning against Israel's disobedience. Summarize the warning below.

A pious Pharisee would think: *If I follow the law more closely, God will remove the curse of Rome!*

Because people like to dance as close as possible to lawbreaking, Jewish legal experts created additional rules to safeguard against actual lawbreaking. The Pharisees called these rules a "fence." Even if the pious broke these traditions, God's law would still be upheld and Israel kept safe.



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This solution, however, quickly became a problem when the Pharisees began thinking their human-made laws stood *equal* with God's. Jesus knew this history and saw the error of the Pharisees' spiritual blindness. Let's now turn to Matthew 14:34–15:20 to see how Jesus responded when they accused His disciples of breaking their sacred traditions.



### Observation: God's Command over Human Tradition

According to Pastor Chuck, the first step we take in the journey of understanding and applying a passage of Scripture is carefully and slowly observing the text.<sup>1</sup>

Observe *Matthew 14:34–15:20* in the following ways: read it silently, read it aloud, listen to it. As you do, take note of the three different groups Jesus addressed and the tone He used with each of them. Think over the text. Jot down additional observations that intrigue you.

In *Matthew 14:13–36*, Jesus performed the following miracles:

- Healed the sick in a remote area off the shore of Galilee
- Multiplied five loaves and two fish to feed thousands of people
- Walked on water
- Calmed the storm
- Healed the sick in Gennesaret



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With all these miracles occurring in quick succession, word about Jesus quickly flooded the region. The top Pharisees heard the news and came to Galilee from Jerusalem to visit Him (*Matthew 15:1*). Check your Bible *atlas* and write below how far they travelled just to confront Jesus.

Distance: \_\_\_\_\_

What accusation did the Pharisees make against Jesus' disciples?

Some of God's laws prohibited eating unclean food (*Leviticus 11*), while other laws required handwashing before certain ceremonies (*Exodus 30:17–21*), but there is no law from Moses demanding handwashing before every meal. The run-of-the-mill listener simply wouldn't have noticed these distinctions, innocently believing this human law came from God.

What word did the Pharisees use to describe their law (*Matthew 15:2*)? \_\_\_\_\_

What word did Jesus use to describe God's law (*15:3*)? \_\_\_\_\_

In *verses 3–6*, Jesus discussed a common practice among Jews as an example of how following the Pharisees' tradition can break God's law. A person who pledged a certain amount of money to God would have an excuse not to provide financially for his or her parents in their old age. This provision would've violated an *essential* way of showing parents honor and obeying God.

*These people had rules on top of rules on top of rules, and they were so binding.*  
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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According to the Pharisees, what was the source of impurity?

According to the Jesus, what was the source of impurity?

Jesus' scathing remarks against the Pharisees make clear that He rejected the traditions they placed over God's commandments. Many of these traditions may feel foreign to us. But . . . could we have some of our own?



### Interpretation: A Pure Heart over Impure Motives

Let's now consider how we can mine what the passage says in order to uncover what it means.

In *Matthew 15:3–6*, Jesus summarized the Pharisaic practice of devoting money to God while withholding support from parents. What underlying motivations have might led someone to follow this tradition? How is Jesus' rebuke relevant for us today? See *Constable's Notes* at [netbible.org](http://netbible.org) for some guidance.



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In an attempt to condemn Jesus, the Pharisees only exposed their own sinfulness. What were the Pharisees guilty of according to Jesus? See Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 1–15* for help.<sup>2</sup>

The Greeks used the term translated “hypocrite” to describe an actor who would wear masks to represent different characters throughout a play. In what ways did the Pharisees put on these masks and act as pretenders in this passage? In what ways does hypocrisy sneak into the church today?

The disciples stood there that day both impressed and perplexed—amazed by Jesus' boldness to reveal the Pharisees' blind spots, while unsure of the actual meaning of His message. In *Matthew 15:15*, Peter asked Jesus to explain the parable. In your own words summarize Jesus' answer in *verses 17–20*. What lesson did Jesus teach His disciples and how is that lesson true for us today?

*The filth of the sewer is not as great as the defilement of the human heart not yet cleaned by the blood of Christ. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



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Our religious performance doesn't entertain Jesus or edify others. But thankfully He came to forgive hypocritical religiosity and burn away our impurities. Pure hearts will always gladden the heart of God as they brim over with thanksgiving and adoration along with loving words and kind deeds.



### Correlation: Understanding Spiritual Blindness

Scripture has a lot to say about spiritual blind spots! Let's look at two passages that are especially pertinent.

When Jesus exposed the Pharisees as hypocrites, He illustrated His point by quoting *Isaiah 29:13*. In this context, the prophet pronounced judgment against ancient Israel because of its unfaithfulness to God. Read *Isaiah 29:22–24*. How does God provide hope for His people despite their sin?

Read *2 Corinthians 4:1–6*. According to the apostle Paul, what does it mean to experience spiritual blindness? How did he express our only hope?

*You are not able to discuss the gospel and the person of Christ in much depth with an individual who is without the Savior until the Holy Spirit is at work and begins to massage to life that which has been darkened that person's entire life. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



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### Application: Identifying Spiritual Blind Spots

Pastor Chuck crafted three applications about spiritual blind spots to help us guard against them and perhaps even grow out of them. Reflect upon these applications below:

1. *The spiritually blind ask the wrong questions.* The Pharisees showed more interest in trying to trap Jesus than seeking to understand the source of His power.
2. *The spiritually blind trust in unscriptural traditions.* When our human traditions usurp God's commandments, we blur the beauty of God's truth for others . . . and ourselves.
3. *The spiritually blind fail to realize that defilement is a matter of the heart.* "People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

What kinds of human traditions do you have today in your spiritual sphere of life? How do they supplement, or perhaps supplant, God's commandments?

Based on what you learned from God's Word in this study and your own prayerful self-reflection, do you sense the Spirit's nudge toward a purer way marked by faithfulness and freedom? If so, what would that purer way look like in your routine?





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Of all the people living in Judea, the highly religious Pharisees should have *gotten* it. But they didn't. They should've given God glory for Jesus' life. But they refused. Their obsession with tradition blinded them from the true light—just as many are blinded today. But for those who receive Him, who believe in His name, He gives the right to be the children of God.



### A FINAL PRAYER

*Heavenly Father, You are a gracious God, and Your law is not a burden. Thank You for giving me these challenging words. I ask You to keep working in me, to keep cleansing me, to keep leading me so that my actions and my heart would be pure and pleasing in Your sight. I ask these things in the worthy name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

#### ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 323–24.

