

Matthew: 15:1–20

From Catena Aurea:

1. Then came to Jesus Scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying,
2. Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.
3. But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?
4. For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death.
5. But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me;
6. And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.

AUGUSTINE. (de Cons. Ev. ii. 49.) The Evangelist thus constructs the order of his narrative, Then came unto him, that, as appeared in the passage over the lake, the order of the events that followed that might be shewn.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. li.) For this reason also the Evangelist marks the time that He may shew their iniquity overcome by nothing; for they came to Him at a time when He had wrought many miracles, when He had healed the sick by the touch of His hem. That the Scribes and Pharisees are here said to have come from Jerusalem, it should be known that they were dispersed through all the tribes, but those that dwelt in the Metropolis were worse than the others, their higher dignity inspiring them with a greater degree of pride.

JEROME. Wonderful infatuation of the Pharisees and Scribes! They accuse the Son of God that He does not keep the traditions and commandments of men.

CHRYSOSTOM. Observe, how they are taken in their own question. They say not, 'Why do they transgress the Law of Moses?' but, the tradition of the elders; whence it is manifest that the Priests had introduced many new things, although Moses had said, Ye shall not add ought to the word which I set before you this day, neither shall ye take ought away from it; (Deut. 4:2.) and when they ought to have been set free from observances, then they bound themselves by many more; fearing lest any should take away their rule and power, they sought to increase the awe in which they were held, by setting themselves forth as legislators.

JEROME. But the hands that are to be washed are the acts not of the body, but of the mind; that the word of God may be done in them.

CHRYSOSTOM. But the disciples now did not eat with washen hands, because they already despised all things superfluous, and attended only to such as were necessary; thus they accepted neither washing nor not washing as a rule, but did either as it happened. For how should they who even neglected the food that was necessary for them, have any care about this rite?

CHRYSOSTOM. Christ made no excuse for them, but immediately brought a counter charge, shewing that he that sins in great things ought not to take offence at the slight sins of others. He answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? He says not that they do well to transgress that He may not give room for calumny; nor on the other hand does He condemn what the Apostles had done, that He may not sanction their traditions; nor again does He bring any charge directly against them of old, that they might not put Him from them as a calumniator; but He points His reproof against those who had come to Him; thus at the same time touching the elders who had laid down such a tradition; saying,

JEROME. Since ye because of the tradition of men neglect the commandment of God, why do ye take upon you to reprove my disciples, for bestowing little regard upon the precepts of the elders, that they may observe the commands of God? For God hath said, Honour thy father and thy mother. Honour in the Scriptures is shewn not so much in salutations and courtesies as in alms and gifts. Honour, (1 Tim. 5:3.) says the Apostle, the widows who are widows indeed; here 'honour' signifies a gift. The Lord then having thought for the infirmity, the age, or the poverty of parents, commanded that sons should honour their parents in providing them with necessaries of life.

CHRYSOSTOM. He desired to shew the great honour that ought to be paid to parents, and therefore attached both a reward and a penalty. But in this occasion the Lord passes over the reward promised to such as did honour their parents, namely, that they should live long upon the earth, and brings forward

the terrible part only, namely, the punishment, that He might strike these dumb and attract others; And he that curseth father and mother, let him die the death; thus He shews that they deserved even death. For if he who dishonours his parent even in word is worthy of death, much more ye who dishonour him in deed; and ye not only dishonour your parents, but teach others to do so likewise. Ye then who do not deserve even to live, how accuse ye my disciples? But how they transgress the commandment of God is clear when He adds, But ye say, Whoso shall say to his father or his mother, If in a gift, whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me.

JEROME. For the Scribes and Pharisees desiring to overturn this foregoing most provident law of God, that they might bring in their impiety under the mask of piety, taught bad sons, that should any desire to devote to God, who is the true parent, those things which ought to be offered to parents, the offering to the Lord should be preferred to the offering them to parents.

JEROME. And thus the parents refusing what they saw thus dedicated to God, that they might not incur the guilt of sacrilege, perished of want, and so it came to pass that what the children offered for the needs of the temple and the service of God, went to the gain of the Priests.

JEROME. Or it may briefly have the following sense; Ye compel children to say to their parents, What gift soever I was purposing to offer to God, you take and consume upon your living, and so it profits you; as much as to say, Do not so.

AUGUSTINE. (cont. Adv. Leg. et Proph. ii. 1.) Christ here clearly shews both that that law which the heretic blasphemes is God's law, and that the Jews had their traditions foreign to the prophetic and canonical books; such as the Apostle calls profane and vain fables.

AUGUSTINE. (cont. Faust. xvi. 24.) The Lord here teaches us many things; That it was not He that turned the Jews from their God; that not only did He not infringe the commandments, but convicts them of infringing them; and that He had ordained no more than those by the hand of Moses.

AUGUSTINE. (Quæst. Ev. i. 16.) Otherwise; The gift whatsoever thou offerest on my account, shall profit thee; that is to say, Whatsoever gift thou offerest on my account, shall henceforth remain with thee; the son signifying by these words that there is no longer need that parents should offer for him, as he is of age to offer for himself. And those who were of age to be able to say thus to their parents, the Pharisees denied that they were guilty, if they did not shew honour to their parents.

7. Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying,

8. This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me.

9. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

10. And he called the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand:

11. Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.

CHRYSOSTOM. The Lord had shewn that the Pharisees were not worthy to accuse those who transgressed the commands of the elders, seeing they overthrew the law of God themselves; and He again proves this by the testimony of the Prophet; Hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

CHRYSOSTOM. Having added weight to His accusation of the Pharisees by the testimony of the Prophet, and not having amended them, He now ceases to speak to them, and turns to the multitudes, And he called the multitude, and said unto them, Hear and understand. Because He was about to set before them a high dogma, and full of much philosophy, He does not utter it nakedly, but so frames His speech that it should be received by them. First, by exhibiting anxiety on their account, which the Evangelist expresses by the words, And he called the multitude to him. Secondly, the time He chooses recommends His speech; after the victory He has just gained over the Pharisees. And He not merely calls the multitude to Him, but rouses their attention by the words, Hear and understand; that is, Attend, and give your minds to what ye are to hear. But He said not unto them, The observance of meats is nought; nor, Moses bade you wrongly; but in the way of warning and advice, drawing His testimony from natural things, Not what entereth in at the mouth defileth a man, but what goeth forth of the mouth that defileth a man.

JEROME. The word herea 'makes a man common' is peculiar to Scripture, and is not hackneyed in common parlance. The Jewish nation, boasting themselves to be a part of God, call those meats common, of which all men partake; for example, swine's flesh, shell fish, hares, and those species of animals that do not divide the hoof, and chew the cud, and among the fish such as have not scales. Hence in the Acts of the Apostles we read, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. (Acts 10:15.) Common then in this sense is that which is free to the rest of mankind, and as though not in part of God, is therefore called unclean.

AUGUSTINE. (cont. Faust. vi. 6.) This declaration of the Lord, Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth a man, is not contrary to the Old Testament. As the Apostle also speaks, To the pure all things are pure; (Tit. 1:15.) and Every creature of God is good. Let the Manichæans understand, (1 Tim. 4:4.) if they can, that the Apostle said this of the very natures and qualities of things; while that letter (of the ritual law) declared certain animals unclean, not in their nature but typically, for certain figures which were needed for a time. Therefore to take an instance in the swine and the lamb, by nature both are clean, because naturally every creature of God is good; but in a certain typical meaning the lamb is clean, and the swine unclean. Take the two words, 'fool,' and 'wise,' in their own nature, as sounds, or letters, both of them are pure, but one of them because of the meaning attached to it, not because of any thing in its own nature, may be said to be impure. And perhaps what the swine are in typical representation, that among mankind is the fool; and the animal, and this word of two syllables (stultus) signify some one and the same thing. That animal is reckoned unclean in the law because it does not chew the cud; but this is not its fault but its nature. But the men of whom this animal is the emblem, are impure by their own fault, not by nature; they readily hear the words of wisdom, but never think upon them again. Whatever of profit you may hear, to summon this up from the internal region of the memory through the sweetness of recollection into the mouth of thought, what is this but spiritually to chew the cud? They who do not this are represented by this species of animal. Such resemblances as these in speech, or in ceremonies, having figurative signification, profitably and pleasantly move the rational mind; but by the former people, many such things were not only to be heard, but to be kept as precepts. For that was a time when it behoved not in words only, but in deeds, to prophesy those things which hereafter were to be revealed. When these had been revealed through Christ, and in Christ, the burdens of observances were not imposed on the faith of the Gentiles; but the authority of the prophecy was yet confirmed. But I ask of the Manichæans, whether this declaration of the Lord, when He said that a man is not defiled by what enters into his mouth, is true or false? If false, why then does their doctor Adimantus bring it forward against the Old Testament? If true, why contrary to its tenor do they consider that they are thus defiled?

JEROME. The thoughtful reader may here object and say, If that which entereth into the mouth defileth not a man, why do we not feed on meats offered to idols? Be it known then that meats and every creature of God is in itself clean; but the invocation of idols and dæmons makes them unclean with those at least who with conscience of the idol eat that which is offered to idols, and their conscience being weak is polluted, as the Apostle says.

12. Then came his disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?

13. But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up.

14. Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.

JEROME. In one of the Lord's discourses the whole superstition of Jewish observances had been cut down. They placed their whole religion in using or abstaining from certain meats.

CHRYSOSTOM. When the Pharisees heard the things that went before, they made no reply to them, because He had so mightily overthrown them, not only refuting their arguments, but detecting their fraud, but they, not the multitudes, were offended at them; Then came his disciples unto him and said, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended after they heard this saying?

JEROME. As this word 'scandalum' (offence or stumblingblock) is of such frequent use in ecclesiastical writings, we will shortly explain it. We might render it in Latin, 'offendiculum,' or 'ruina,' or 'impactio;' and so when we read, Whosoever shall scandalize, we understand, Whoso by word or deed has given an occasion of falling to any.

CHRYSOSTOM. Christ does not remove the stumblingblock out of the way of the Pharisees, but rather rebukes them; as it follows, But he answered and said, Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted shall be rooted up. This Manichæus affirmed was spoken of the Law, but what has been already said is a sufficient refutation of this. For if He had said this of the Law, how would He have above contended for the Law, saying, Why transgress ye the commandment of God through your tradition? Or would He have cited the Prophet? Or how, if God said, Honour thy father and thy mother, is not this, being spoken in the Law, a plant of God?

HILARY. What He intends then by a plant not planted of His Father, is that tradition of men under cover of which the Law had been transgressed, this He instructs them must be rooted up.

JEROME. Shall that plant also be rooted up of which the Apostle says, I planted, Apollos watered? (1 Cor. 3:6.) The question is answered by what follows, but God gave the increase. He says also, Ye are God's husbandry, a building of God; and in another place, We are workers together of God. And if when Paul

plants, and Apollos waters, they are in so doing workers together with God, then God plants and waters together with them. This passage is abused by some who apply it at once to two different kinds of men; they say, 'If every plant, which the Father hath not planted shall be rooted up, then that which He has planted cannot be rooted up.' But let them hear these words of Jeremiah, I had planted thee a true vine, wholly a right seed, how then art thou turned into the bitterness of a strange vine? (Jer. 2:21.) God indeed has planted it, and none may root up His planting. But since that planting was through the disposition of the will of him which was planted, none other can root it up unless its own will consents thereto.

GLOSS. (interlin.) Or, the plant here spoken of may be the doctors of the Law with their followers, who had not Christ for their foundation. Why they are to be rooted up, He adds, Let them alone; they are blind, leaders of the blind.

JEROME. This is also the same as that Apostolic injunction, A heretic after the first and second admonition reject, knowing that such a one is perverse. (Tit. 3:10, 11.) To the same end the Saviour commands evil teachers to be left to their own will, knowing that it is hardly that they can be brought to the truth.

15:15–20

15. Then answered Peter and said unto him, Declare unto us this parable.

16. And Jesus said, Are ye also yet without understanding?

17. Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly,, and is cast out into the draught?

18. But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man.

19. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies:

20. These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man.

JEROME. He is reprov'd by the Lord, because He supposed that to be spoken parabolically, which was indeed spoken plainly. Which teaches us that that hearer is to be blamed who would take dark sayings as clear, or clear sayings as obscure.

CHRYSOSTOM. Or, The Lord blames him, because it was not from any uncertainty that he asked this, but from offence which he had taken. The multitudes had not understood what had been said; but the

disciples were offended at it, whence at the first they had desired to ask Him concerning the Pharisees, but had been stayed by that mighty declaration, Every plant, &c. But Peter, who is ever zealous, is not silent even so; therefore the Lord reproves him, adding a reason for His reproof, Do ye not understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught?

JEROME. Some cavil at this, that the Lord is ignorant of physical disputation in saying that all food goes into the belly, and is cast out into the draught; for that the food, as soon as it is taken, is distributed through the limbs, the veins, the marrow, and the nerves. But it should be known, that the lighter juices, and liquid food after it has been reduced and digested in the veins and vessels, passes into the lower parts through those passages which the Greeks call 'pores,' and so goes into the draught.

AUGUSTINE. (de Vera Relig. 40.) The nourishment of the body being first changed into corruption, that is, having lost its proper form, is absorbed into the substance of the limbs, and repairs their waste, passing through a medium into another form, and by the spontaneous motion of the parts is so separated, that such portions as are adapted for the purpose are taken up into the structure of this fair visible, while such as are unfit are rejected through their own passages. One part consisting of fæces is restored to earth to reappear again in new forms; another part goes off in perspiration, and another is taken up by the nervous system for the purposes of reproduction of the species.

CHRYSOSTOM. But the Lord in thus speaking answers His disciples after Jewish infirmity; He says that the food does not abide, but goes out; but if it did abide, yet would it not make a man unclean. But they could not yet hear these things. Thus Moses also pronounces that they continued unclean, so long as the food continued in them; for he bids them wash in the evening, and then they should be clean, calculating the time of digestion and egestion.

AUGUSTINE. (de Trin. xv. 10.) And the Lord includes herein man's two mouths, one of the body, one of the heart. For when He says, Not all that goeth into the mouth defileth a man, He clearly speaks of the body's mouth; but in that which follows, He alludes to the mouth of the heart, But those things which proceed out of the mouth, come forth from the heart, and they defile a man.

CHRYSOSTOM. For the things which are of the heart, remain within a man, and defile him in going out of him, as well as in abiding in him; yea, more in going out of him; wherefore He adds, Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts; He gives these the first place, because this was the very fault of the Jews, who laid snares for Him.

JEROME. The principle therefore of the soul is not according to Plato in the brain, but according to Christ in the heart, and by this passage we may refute those who think that evil thoughts are suggestions of the Devil, and do not spring from our proper will. The Devil may encourage and abet evil thoughts, but not originate them. And if he be able, being always on the watch, to blow into flame any small spark of thought in us, we should not thence conclude that he searches the hidden places of the heart, but that from our manner and motions he judges of what is passing within us. For instance, if he see us direct frequent looks towards a fair woman, he understands that our heart is wounded through the eye.

GLOSS. (non occ.) And from evil thoughts proceed evil deeds and evil words, which are forbidden by the law; whence He adds Murders, which are forbidden by that commandment of the Law, Thou shalt not kill; Adulteries, fornications, which are understood to be forbidden by that precept, Thou shalt not commit adultery; Thefts, forbidden by the command, Thou shalt not steal; False witness, by that, Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour; Blasphemies, by that, Thou shalt not take the name of God in vain.

GLOSS. (non occ.) And because these words of the Lord had been occasioned by the iniquity of the Pharisees, who preferred their traditions to the commands of God, He hence concludes that there was no necessity for the foregoing tradition, But to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man.

CHRYSOSTOM. He said not that to eat the meats forbidden in the Law defiles not a man, that they might not have what to answer to Him again, but He concludes in that concerning which the disputation had been.

From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:

15:1 The Scribes and Pharisees

The Scribes Came from Jerusalem.

Origen: Pharisees and scribes came to him from Jerusalem. They did not come because they were amazed at the power in Jesus that healed people even if they “only touched the edge of his cloak.” Instead, they came with a faultfinding attitude and brought an accusation before the teacher. The accusation did not concern the transgression of a commandment of God but rather the transgression of one tradition of the

Jewish elders. Probably the charge of the faultfinders itself displays the piety of the disciples of Jesus, because they offered no grounds at all for criticism by the Pharisees and scribes in regard to transgressing the commandments of God. The Pharisees and scribes would not have brought the charge of transgressing the commandment of the elders against the disciples of Jesus if, indeed, they were able to get a firm hold on the ones who were being accused and were able to show that they were transgressing a commandment of God. Commentary on Matthew 11.8.

When and Where.

Chrysostom: It says that the Pharisees and scribes came to him “then.” When? When he had worked thousands of signs, when he had healed the sick with the touch of his tassel. It is for this reason that the Evangelist indicates the time, so that he might show that their unspeakable wickedness is second to none. But what is intended by the phrase “the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem”? They were scattered everywhere throughout the tribes and were divided into twelve parts. But the ones who were in charge of the mother city were more wicked than the others, because they enjoyed more honor and had become extremely arrogant. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 51.1.

15:2 The Traditions of the Elders

Why Transgress the Tradition?

Chrysostom: Now consider with me how they are convicted even by the very act of asking the question. For they do not say, “Why do they transgress the law of Moses?” Instead they say, “Why do they transgress the tradition of the elders?” From this it is clear that the priests were instituting many new practices, even though Moses with great fear and with dreadful words had commanded that one should neither add nor take away anything. For he says, “Do not add to this word that I am commanding you today, and do not take away from it.” But this did not at all stop them from instituting new practices. The issue here provides an example: eating with unwashed hands, which they thought unlawful. They focused inordinately on the outward rites of washing cups and things made of bronze and the rules for washing themselves. By this time they should have been released from needless observances. God’s timing had moved forward to that point. But just at that point they bound people up with many more observances. Why did they turn things upside down? Because they were afraid that someone might take away their power. They wanted others to be more afraid of them. They themselves had become the lawgivers. The issue of transgressing the traditions of the elders had gotten so inverted that they were insisting that their

own commandments be kept even if God's commandment was violated. They exercised so much obsessive control that the issue finally became a matter of formal legal accusation. But the indictment would instead fall against them in two ways. They themselves were instituting new practices and were devising punishments in regard to their own observances while placing no value on those instituted by God. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 51.1.

They Do Not Wash Their Hands.

Chromatius: Among other observations, some of the Jewish elders ruled that a person should not take or eat food unless he first washed his hands. This observation, however, reveals a particular custom that is human and produces no beneficial effect. Therefore this tradition of the elders is practically useless, for it does not benefit a person's health. No justification is gained from this tradition, and no harm is done in disregarding it. For God is not concerned whether a man washes his hands before eating but whether he has kept his heart washed and his conscience clean from the filth of sin. Truly, what good is it to wash your hands and to have a defiled conscience? The Lord's disciples were clean of heart and were guided by an untainted conscience. Hence they were not overly concerned with washing their hands. They had washed them once in baptism with their whole body, in accord with our Lord's words to Peter: "He who has bathed needs only to wash, and he is clean all over, as you are clean." Tractate on Matthew 53.1.

15:3–4 Transgressing the Commandment of God

Why Do You Transgress the Command of God?

Origen: The Savior summarized and explained two commandments of the law, one from the Decalogue in Exodus, the other from Leviticus or one of the other books in the Pentateuch. We have already described how they set aside the word of God that says, "Honor your father and your mother." They say, "One should not honor one's father or mother if one has said to one's father or mother, 'Anything by which you might have derived benefit from me has been dedicated as a gift to God.' " But now someone might ask, Is not the next statement just an unrelated addition when it says, "Let the one who speaks maliciously against one's father or mother die under the death penalty. For it may be granted that one does not honor one's father and mother when one has dedicated by the formula called Corban the things that would be given for the honor of father and mother"? But how does the tradition of the Pharisees also set aside the statement, "Let the one who speaks maliciously against one's father or mother die under the death

penalty"? Perhaps the answer is that it is just as if one was heaping malicious accusations on one's father or mother if one has said to them, "Anything by which you might have derived benefit from me has been dedicated as a gift to God." It is as if one is saying that the parents are temple robbers if they receive the things dedicated by the Corban formula from the one who has dedicated them by that formula. For this reason if any person's sons say, "Anything by which you might have derived benefit from me has been dedicated as a gift to God," Jews punish them as the law demands as if they were speaking maliciously against their father or mother. But you, Jesus says, are setting aside two commandments of God by your one tradition. Then you are not even ashamed when you accuse my disciples when they are not transgressing any commandment. For they were walking blamelessly in all the commandments and ordinances. Commentary on Matthew 11.10.

15:5–6 Making Void the Word of God

15:7–8 Hearts Far from God

Their Heart Is Far from Me.

Origen: I have previously quoted some of the words of Isaiah that precede the verse quoted in the Gospel and some of the words that follow the verse quoted in the Gospel. In this way we may show the way in which the word promises that it will close "the eyes" of those of the people who were "out of their senses" and "drunken" and who had been given to drink a "spirit of stupefaction." The word also promises to "close the eyes both of their prophets and their rulers" who claim to "see the hidden things."

I suppose that these very things happened after the Savior had dwelt with these people. For "all the words," the words of the Scriptures in their entirety and also those of Isaiah, became to them "as the words of a sealed book." Now the word sealed was said as if the book was sealed with obscurity and not opened with clarity. The book is unclear to those who right from the start are "not able to read it" simply because "they are illiterate." It is also equally unclear to "those who are literate" because they do not understand the meaning in the things that have been written.

Hence the word rightly adds to these things that the people would "fall into unconsciousness" because of their sins and would be "out of their senses" with madness against the word. The word also adds that the people would "be drunk" against it "with a spirit of stupefaction." The Lord would give them this "spirit of stupefaction" to drink when he "closed their eyes," because they were unworthy of seeing. This would

happen to the eyes of “both their prophets and their rulers” that claimed to “see the hidden things” of the mysteries in the divine Scriptures. The word says that when all these things had happened and when their eyes had been closed, then the prophetic words would be sealed and concealed from them. This is exactly what the people experienced along with those who did not believe in Jesus as Messiah. Commentary on Matthew 11.11.

15:9 Teaching Human Precepts

In Vain Do They Worship Me.

Chrysostom: Did you notice that prophecy agrees exactly with what was said here and that it long ago predicted their evil? For this very thing with which the Messiah now indicts them was also said long ago by Isaiah. Isaiah said that they despise the things of God: “They worship me in vain.” But Isaiah also said that they place great value on their own concerns: “They teach as commandments the teachings of human beings.” Therefore, it was on reasonable grounds that the disciples did not keep these teachings. Jesus thus strikes them with a mortal blow. He does this on the basis of the circumstances, on the basis of their own covenant to which they had consented, and on the basis of the prophet who had intensified the grounds of the accusation. He does not talk with the scribes at all because they had ceased to accept any more correction. Instead, he directed his message to the crowds so that he could introduce doctrine that is high and great and full of philosophical insight. He took this as his starting point and finally wove in that which was greater, even throwing out the observance of kinds of food. But note when in the sequence of events this happens. When he has cleansed the leper; when he has nullified the Sabbath; when he has displayed himself as king of land and sea; when he has instituted laws; when he has forgiven sins; when he has raised dead people; when he has supplied them with many examples of his deity. It is then that he talks with them about food laws. For all of Judaism is held together by this; and if you take this away, you also have taken away the whole thing. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 51.2–3.

15:10 Hearing and Understanding

He Called the People to Him.

Chrysostom: He does not simply reveal to them what he has to say but first makes his message easy to receive by respect and courtesy. For the Evangelist showed this when he said, “Jesus called the crowd to himself.” Then he also makes his message easy to receive by its timing. For it comes after the rebuttal of

his critics, his victory over them and the accusation cited from the prophet. It is then that he begins the process of instituting a law, when the things that he is saying were even more easily accepted.

In addition, he does not simply call them to himself but also makes them more attentive. For he says, "Take notice," that is, "Start thinking, wake up." For the law he was about to enact was such that it required attention. "For you listened when the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem nullified the law because of their own tradition and at the wrong time. Since this is so, much more should you listen to me as I lead you into a greater philosophy at the appropriate time."

He also did not say, "The observance of food laws is nothing," or "Moses did a poor job of making laws," or "Moses only made these laws as a way of coming down to your level." Instead, he speaks to them on the level of advice and counsel and took the testimony of natural phenomena. He does this when he says, "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." In this statement he appeals to nature itself both in the process of instituting law and in the process of revealing what he has to say. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 51.3.

15:11 What Comes Out of the Mouth

Not What Enters into the Mouth Makes One Holy.

Origen: Now anyone who has come to this place in the text can agree that it is "not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man," even if it is considered to be defiling by Jews. In exactly the same way it is "not what enters into the mouth" that makes the person holy. This is so even if that which is called the bread of the Lord is considered to make the person holy by some of the more impeccable disciples. The two cases are similar. It is not the food but the conscience of the one who eats with doubt about its propriety that defiles the person who has eaten. For "the one who doubts is condemned if one eats, because one is not eating from faith." It is also like the case in which "nothing is pure to the one who is defiled and unbelieving." The thing involved is impure not because of itself but because of the person's defilement and unbelief. In the same way, that which is "made holy through the word of God and prayer" does not on its own account make the one who uses it holy. For if it did, it would also make holy the one who eats of the Lord "in an unworthy manner" and no one would become "weak" or "sickly" or would "sleep" because of this food. For this is what Paul showed in the statement, "Because of this many among you are weak and sickly and a significant number are

falling asleep.” Therefore, in the case of the bread of the Lord, the one who uses it derives benefit when one shares in the bread with a mind that is undefiled and a conscience that is pure. Commentary on Matthew 11.14–15.

The Spring of Sins.

Origen: We are accused by the Jews and Ebionites of being violators of the laws that we read in Leviticus and Deuteronomy concerning clean and unclean food. But by means of what is said in this passage we are clearly taught by the Savior not to think that the simple meaning of these laws is the aim intended in the Scripture. For Jesus says, “Not that which enters into the mouth defiles a person but that which comes out of the mouth.” Especially significant is what is said in the Gospel of Mark: “Thus he declared all foods clean.” Since all this is so, it is obvious that we are not defiled when we eat things that are said to be unclean by Jews, who want to serve the letter of the law. Instead, we are defiled when we say whatever happens to be on our mind and we talk about things that we should not talk about, even though our lips should be bound “with perception” and we should make for them “a measuring balance and a standard of measure.” The spring of sins comes to us from such talking. Commentary on Matthew 11.12.

Food as Such Does Not Defile.

Chromatius: The Lord wanted to show up the uncalledfor offense taken by the scribes and the Pharisees about unwashed hands. So he beckoned the crowd to him and said, “What goes into the mouth does not defile a man; but that which comes out of the mouth, that defiles a man.” He explained that a man is defiled not from the food that enters his mouth but from the perverse thoughts of his mind, which proceed from his heart. For the food we receive for eating was created and blessed by God to sustain human life. So, it cannot defile a man. Indeed, wicked and perverse thoughts that proceed from the heart, as the Lord himself noted—“murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, blasphemy,” the author of which is the devil—these are the things that really defile a man. Tractate on Matthew 53.2.

15:12 Offending the Pharisees

The Pharisees Were Offended.

Chrysostom: The disciples were saying these things not only because they felt pain on behalf of the Pharisees but also because they themselves were a little confused. But since they did not dare to say this

out of concern for their own confusion, they hoped to learn further by listening to Jesus' own elaboration of this issue. To show that this is so, listen to what is said after these things by Peter, who was hotheaded and everywhere arriving before the rest. He says, "Explain this parable to us." By this he reveals the confusion in his soul. He does not dare to say openly, "I take offense at this," but he expects that he will be released from his confusion by the interpretation of the parable. So he too was rebuked. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 51.4.

15:13 Rooting Up What God Has Not Planted

Their Own Precepts.

Chromatius: Since the scribes and Pharisees had burst forth in great arrogance and transgressed the divine law, they "planted" their own precepts but not God's. They wanted these to be observed as divine law. So, not without good reason, did they too, with this planting of their own doctrine, deserve to be uprooted by the Lord. And so the Lord said, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up." Indeed, that plant was not of God but of people. Any iniquitous plant, not only of the scribes and Pharisees but also of all heretics, shall be uprooted by the Lord. Though it may extend its branches of infidelity in due season, it cannot be firmly rooted, for such a plant is not of God but of the devil. Furthermore, it must be uprooted and consigned to perpetual fire, since it yields no fruit of faith and wholesomeness. Tractate on Matthew 53.7.

God's Plantings.

Chrysostom: Why therefore does Messiah say, "Every plant that my heavenly Father did not plant will be uprooted"? Those who are diseased with the ideas of the Manichaeans say that this was said about the law. But what Jesus had said before this shuts their mouths. For if he were speaking about the law, why did he earlier make a defense on its behalf and fight for it when he said, "Why are you transgressing the commandment of God because of your tradition?" And why does he bring in the prophet [Isaiah] in front of everyone? Contrary to what the Manichaeans say, Jesus says these things about the Pharisees themselves and their traditions. For God said, "Honor your father and your mother." This statement from God surely is a plant of god. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 51.4.

God Gives Growth to His Plantings.

Jerome: Even what seems to be clear in the Scriptures presents many problems. Christ said, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.” Does this mean, therefore, that there will be uprooted also that plant which the apostle speaks of when Paul says, “I have planted, Apollos watered”? The problem is solved, however, from the words that follow: “But God has given the growth.” He also says, “You are God’s field, God’s building.” And in another place we read, “We are God’s coworkers”; therefore, if we are his coworkers, with Paul planting and Apollos watering, God plants and waters with his workers. Commentary on Matthew 2.15.13.

15:14 Blind Guides

Blind Leaders of the Blind.

Origen: “They are blind guides of blind people.” Who are these blind guides? The Pharisees, whose minds “the god of this age has blinded” because they are “unbelieving,” since they did not believe in Jesus Christ. The god of this age has blinded them “so that the light of the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Christ would not shine on them.” We ought to avoid being guided by those blind persons. Not only should we do this, but we certainly should also listen with caution in the case of those who claim to lead in the way of healthy teaching and ought to apply healthy judgment to what they say. We should do these things so that we ourselves do not appear to be blind because we do not see the meaning of the Scriptures. We would become blind like this if we were guided by the ignorance of people who are blind and people who do not perceive the issues of healthy teaching. If we were led by such people, both the one who leads and the one who is led would fall into the pit. Commentary on Matthew 11.14.

Let Them Alone.

Chromatius: He then goes on to say, “Let them alone; they are blind guides of blind men. But if a blind man guide a blind man, both fall into a pit.” These words were intended to expose the scribes and Pharisees, who were blinded by the error of their unbelief. Not only were they unable to recognize the light of truth—not believing in Christ—but also they were attracting others into the pit of death. Nevertheless the words also apply to heretics. Denying that Christ is the “true light from true light, and God from God,” they too were steeped in blindness. Because of their perverse doctrine, they also proved to be guides and leaders to those adrift. Tractate on Matthew 53.8.

15:15–16 Still Without Understanding

Without Understanding.

Cyril of Alexandria: “Without understanding” is what the Lord calls those who, like the Pharisees, make a fuss about external matters and have not yet discovered the inner life. Meats, therefore, he says, have to do with filling up the body, but they do not reach into the heart. But that which does not reach to the heart is not able to defile the faithful [genuine] man or cause him to become unclean. Fragment 185.

15:17 What Passes on

Why Food Laws Were Given.

Chromatius: The Pharisees, as Peter made clear, begrudgingly grasped the dictum of the Lord which says, “It is not what enters the mouth that defiles a man.” God indicated through Moses long ago that not everything about the use of food must be considered clean. He declared that certain things were clean and other things were unclean. But now we must ask why God prohibited the people long ago to eat these things. Since all things created by God to be used as human food were blessed at the very beginning and they remain no less so by their very nature, why is it that divine law later prescribed to the Jewish people certain things as lawful for eating because they were clean and certain things as unlawful because they were unclean? First, precepts of this type were given by the Lord because of the dissipation and immoderate appetite of the people. For since they were overly concerned with eating and drinking, these people began to overlook God’s precepts. They made for themselves a molten calf in Horeb, about which it was written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” Those necessary things were forbidden by the Lord, so that with the best food having been denied and their immoderate appetites mortified, the people might abide more easily by the discipline of divine observance. It was only after their disobedience with the molten calf that we find those things were prohibited. Concerning them, as though to rebuke this stiffnecked people, the Lord made a mild and merciful pronouncement: “They shall be unclean to you.” Not that they are in themselves unclean, but “shall be.” Nor did he say “to all” but “to you.” He thus made it clear that neither were they unclean nor would they be unclean to people other than themselves. And certainly they deserved this prohibition of many foods, for these people preferred the meats of Egypt, as well as cucumbers and muskmelons, to heavenly manna. Tractate on Matthew 53.3.

15:18 What Proceeds from the Heart

The Stomach Compared with the Heart.

Chrysostom: Note how sharply he deals with them and how he delivers his rebuke. He rebukes with a view to their cure. He appeals to our common human nature when he says, "Whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on." Even if it did abide for a while, it would not make one unclean. Yet they were not able to hear this. Because of this the lawgiver allows just so much time for the law to have effect. After it has gone through one's system, it is dispelled. At evening he asks you to wash yourself and so be clean. The time of digesting and excreting is a limited time. But in matters of the heart, they abide within. He is not making a refutation of the goodness of the nature of things. Rather, Jesus is speaking of the difference between what proceeds from the stomach and what proceeds from the heart. One does not remain; the other does. One enters in from the outside. The other goes out from the inside, and having gone forth it may defile, and the more it goes out the more it defiles. They were not yet able to be taught these things. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 51.4.

15:19 Evil Thoughts

Out of the Heart.

Jerome: "Out of the heart," he said, "come evil thoughts." Therefore the soul or principle of action is not in the brain according to Plato but in the heart according to Christ. On this point, those who believe that thoughts are introduced by the devil and do not originate from our own will are to be repudiated. The devil can aid and abet evil thoughts but he cannot originate them, even though, ever lying in wait, he kindles a small spark of our thoughts with his tinder. We must not hold the opinion that the devil can also probe the depths of our heart. However, he can judge from our demeanor and gestures what we are thinking about. For example, if he sees us gazing often at a beautiful woman, he surmises that our heart has been wounded with the dart of love. Commentary on Matthew 2.15.19.

15:20 What Defiles and What Does Not

These Are What Defile.

Origen: These things are what “defiles the person” when they come out from the heart and, after they have gone out from it, go through the mouth. Thus if they did not occur outside of the heart but were held by the person somewhere around the heart, not being allowed to be spoken through the mouth, they would very quickly disappear and the person would not be defiled any longer. Therefore the source and beginning of every sin is “evil reasonings.” For if these reasonings did not prevail, there would be neither murders nor acts of adultery nor any other of such things. Because of this each one ought to keep one’s own heart with all watchfulness. Commentary on Matthew 11.14–15.

Wash Yourself with Virtue.

Chrysostom: “To eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.” Let us learn then what are the things that defile the person. Let us learn them and flee from them. For even in the church we still see such a custom prevailing among many that gives great attention to what we are wearing and whether we have our hands washed. But as to presenting a clean soul to God, they make no account. I say wash to what degree is fitting, but above all wash with virtues and not with water only. No one is forbidding the washing of the hands or mouth, but the real filth of the mouth is evil speaking, blasphemy, reviling, angry words, filthy talking, inordinate laughter and immature jesting. If you are not conscious of yourself doing these things or of being defiled with this filth, then draw near with confidence. But if you have often done these things and received these stains, why do you think that washing your tongue with water is going to change anything? You labor in vain to wash it out externally, while you are still inwardly carrying such deadly and hurtful filth. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 51.4–5.