

## Matthew 15:1 – 28

<sup>1</sup> Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup> ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ <sup>3</sup> And he answered and said to them, ‘Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’ <sup>4</sup> For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.’ <sup>5</sup> But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,’ <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: <sup>8</sup> ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. <sup>9</sup> But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ <sup>10</sup> After Jesus called the crowd to him, he said to them, ‘Hear and understand. <sup>11</sup> It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.’ <sup>12</sup> Then the disciples came and said to him, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?’ <sup>13</sup> But he answered and said, ‘Every plant which my heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. <sup>14</sup> Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.’ <sup>15</sup> Peter said to him, ‘Explain the parable to us.’ <sup>16</sup> Jesus said, ‘Are you still lacking in understanding also? <sup>17</sup> Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated?’ <sup>18</sup> But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. <sup>19</sup> For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. <sup>20</sup> These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.’ <sup>21</sup> Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.’ <sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and implored him, saying, ‘Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.’ <sup>24</sup> But he answered and said, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ <sup>25</sup> But she came and began to bow down before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me!’ <sup>26</sup> And he answered and said, ‘It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’ <sup>27</sup> But she said, ‘Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.’ <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus said to her, ‘O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed at once.

## Theme of Bread in Matthew 14 – 16

Mt.14:13 – 33	Mt.14:34 – 15:20	Mt.15:21 – 28	Mt.15:29 – 39	Mt.16:1 – 12
From the towns (Mt.14:13)	Gennesaret (Mt.14:34), likely the Gentile side	Tyre and Sidon (Mt.15:21), Gentile lands	Along the Sea of Galilee (Mt.15:29, called 'Galilee of the Gentiles' in Mt.4:15; the Decapolis in Mk.7:31)	The region of Magadan (Mt.15:39), which is unknown but along the Galilee
Jesus feeds the 5,000	Jesus disputes with Pharisees	The Canaanite woman asks for miraculous healing	Jesus feeds the 4,000	The Pharisees come to ask Jesus for a sign
Jews 5 loaves of bread 12 baskets full leftover	Jews Defiling comes from the heart, not from eating unkosher food, and is therefore universal – both Jew and Gentile are defiled	Gentiles The 'children's bread' is thrown to 'the dogs.'	Gentiles 7 loaves of bread 7 baskets full leftover	Jews Jesus reminds his disciples to beware the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees

### Cultural Background

- The Mosaic Law never asked the Jews to wash before every meal. That comes from the Pharisees' innovation. They looked at Jerusalem and the Temple and said, 'It's corrupt because it's been occupied by the Romans. So all the hyper cleanliness that the priests would have done in the Temple, we're going to do out here.' (Jacob Neusner, 'Two Pictures of the Pharisees: Philosophical Circle or Eating Club?' *Anglican Theological Review* 64 (1982): 525 – 38.)
- The Pharisees held that you could give wealth to the Temple or synagogue that you normally would have given your aging parents.
- Most Canaanites were hostile to Israel, historically. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote, 'Of the Phoenicians, the Tyrians have the most ill-feeling towards us.' (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 121). Israel opposed their child sacrifice and other sins (Gen.4:16 – 25; 22; Lev.18:21; 1 Ki.16:34; 2 Ki.3:27; Mic.6:7). Israel, however, welcomed the conversion of Canaanites: Judah married Shua (Gen.38:2), learned to accept Tamar (Gen.38); Shaul (Ex.6:15); a 'mixed multitude' (Ex.12:38); Caleb (Num.32:12); Rahab (Josh.6:17 – 25). The conquest of Canaan is a full discussion in itself. See my presentation(s) on that for more info, located on this page: [http://nagasawafamily.org/archives\\_question\\_goodness\\_of\\_god.htm](http://nagasawafamily.org/archives_question_goodness_of_god.htm)
- Dog: a term Jews commonly gave to Gentiles. The Greek term *kusin* (e.g. Mt.7:6) referred to street dogs, and was a label of exclusion, for 'in those days the dogs were the unclean scavengers of the street.' (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p.122). However, if this exchange were originally in Greek and not Aramaic, then it is significant that Jesus used the diminutive term *kunariois*, which were not the larger street dogs, but smaller household pets (ibid, p.122). R.T. France cautions that there is no evidence of a distinction between the two types of dog in the Aramaic language (France, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew*, p.250). However, it is extremely likely that Jesus and the disciples, having grown up in the Galilee area, spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek; and the woman, being in a Greek territory, spoke Greek. Thus, my judgment is that this conversation probably happened in Greek, and that the distinction between the terms is very significant.

## Questions

1. What's the difference between tradition and commandment?
  - a. What's the big deal with washing hands? Why would the Pharisees' innovate by taking the cleanliness required at the Temple and making it required everywhere?
    - i. It's more visible and public
    - ii. Temple and synagogue are the largest meetings of people
    - iii. Finances are important; leaders tend to think about dollars
    - iv. The Pharisees thought that Jews are internally clean by virtue of being Jews, but external things make you unclean.
    - v. This also resulted in the Pharisees not eating with other people who were less 'clean' ceremonially than them. Later, the question of Jews and Gentiles eating together would rock the Galatians.
  - b. Is Jesus changing the subject in v.4? Is it a non sequitur? No: He's illustrating a point about how tradition eclipses commandment. How many things did the Pharisees do wrong regarding honoring father and mother?
    - i. They invented a way to be stingy, and kill two birds with one stone: You could take the wealth that you normally would have given your aging parents, and instead, you could dedicate it to the Temple or synagogue.
    - ii. They greatly weakened the commandment to honor parents
    - iii. Put tradition above Scripture when the two were in conflict.
    - iv. Honored God with their lips (lip service) but taught false things (lip service)
    - v. Their heart was turned against God, as shown by what they said and taught and did. That's fundamentally why Jesus brings this up.
  - c. How do Christians observe 'Temple-like traditions' more than God's commandments?
    - i. Mission is commanded. Church on Friday night is not – it's a tradition. Why do we sometimes stress Friday night fellowship to be of higher importance than mission?
    - ii. We make 'attendance at church' an indication of maturity while we make jokes that are gay-bashing or offensive to other people. And yet we are commanded to give up coarse joking (Eph.5:1 – 5).
  - d. Why do we do that?
2. In our society, the heart is regarded as the source of love. How might Jesus comment on that idea? What is Jesus' point about the heart and uncleanness?
  - a. The heart is the source of defilement
  - b. The heart is the source of words. Notice the theme of speech running through this passage: speaks evil of father or mother (v.4), you say, 'Whoever says...' (v.5), with their lips (v.8), teaching as doctrines the precepts of men (v.9), what proceeds out of the mouth (v.11), the things that proceed out of the mouth (v.18).
  - c. The basic conflict here between Jesus and the Pharisees is the direction of defilement. Does it come from the outside? Or from the inside?
3. What comes out of the disciples' mouth in 15:21 – 28 now that they're with the Canaanite woman? Prejudice, ethnocentrism.
  - a. What questions do you have about this passage? (Typically, what will come up are:
    - i. Why does Jesus call her a dog? Is he agreeing with the racist view that Gentiles were dogs?
    - ii. What does the bread symbolize?
  - b. A lot of what happens here is 'between the lines.' Maybe it was partially dependent on the facial expression of Jesus – a raised eyebrow in humor, etc. There is no clue as to the non-verbal communication, admittedly. But there's enough here for us to try to figure this out.
    - i. Mark calls the Canaanite woman a 'Syrophenician woman' (Mk.7:26). Why does Matthew refer to her as a 'Canaanite woman' (Mt.15:22)? What did that ethnicity mean for a Jewish audience? Historic enemy. Recall that Matthew wrote for primarily a Jewish audience. What issue is Jesus dealing with in them?
    - ii. Why do you think Jesus is silent in 15:23? To wait for the disciples to jump in and say something.
    - iii. What else could they have said? 'Jesus, why don't you heal her daughter?'
    - iv. What does their response say about them? They don't like the Canaanite woman.

- v. What did Jesus say about what comes out of the mouth in 15:18 – 19? ‘But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders...’ THAT is what comes out of the mouth of the disciples.
  - c. So why does Jesus call her a dog?
    - i. It’s something the disciples would have thought. He’s doing it because of their prejudice.
    - ii. He’s giving the woman a ‘way in’ and changing the meaning of that term. Notice: What term did Jews normally use for Gentiles? The term *kusin* for the large stray dogs that live outside the house. But notice that Jesus uses the term *kunariois*, for the little pet dogs. What is he inviting her into?
    - iii. How does she reply? With a development of Jesus’ parable. Jesus seems to appreciate the guts and wit of the woman. She picks up on this and says, ‘I’m part of the family!’ That’s what it means when the dogs are part of the master’s family. Notice that she’s also called Jesus, ‘Lord, Son of David.’ She’s counted herself in, as his.
    - iv. Jesus is restoring the wide definition of ‘Israel’ as well – Israel as a FAITH community, not an ETHNIC community. That was the debate between Jesus and many Jewish leaders of his day: the nature of Israel.
      - 1. Paul in Galatians 6:16 uses the name ‘Israel’ to mean ‘Jew and Gentile in Christ.’
      - 2. Paul also uses the term ‘Israel’ to probably mean that in Romans 11:26, a very significant usage.
      - 3. So when Jesus says, ‘I have come to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Mt.15:24), what was he saying? He is clarifying that Israel was never meant to be an ethnic community. It was always a faith community. How much more so with the King of Israel?!? She, believing in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, is part of Israel.
    - v. Jesus and the woman together reverse the ‘exclusion’ of the dog image that Jews commonly put on Gentiles.
    - vi. How does Jesus honor her ‘wish’? What does her wish suggest?
      - 1. He does heal her daughter, as much as he healed any other Jewish person.
      - 2. He responds to her faith.
      - 3. He also seems to suggest that her ‘wish’ or ‘desire’ (Greek *theleis*) reflects something good that remains in her heart, despite the evil and corruption that is also there (Mt.15:18 – 20). That is what drew her to Jesus, and he honors it.
  - d. Application: Jesus takes us with him into his mission, and when he does, we find out what our heart problems are: our limitations, prejudices, hatreds, apathy, callousness, etc. are. That’s when Jesus starts to work with us on those things, too.
  - e. Application: Sometimes when you go to another culture, you see the sins of your own culture better. When has that happened for you? Is Jesus giving you an opportunity to go with him in loving a certain person? Or people group?
4. So why is it easy to focus on Temple-like traditions rather than reaching the outsider?
- a. Traditions tend to be centered around a gathering place: Temple or synagogue (or church service). Consider tithing – it’s not actually biblical; it was an Old Testament practice that involved feasting with God, the poor, the alien, and the Levite; in the New Testament, all wealth belongs to God.
  - b. It takes us going out as well! If we don’t follow Jesus into ‘Canaanite’ neighborhoods, then we don’t see the sin in ourselves. If we don’t lead new Christians into ‘Canaanite’ neighborhoods, we don’t see the sin in them either. We develop a sense of holiness based on a ‘Temple-like tradition’ that has very little to do with the mission of Jesus.
  - c. Lesson: Jesus takes us with him into his mission, and when he does, we find out what our heart problems are: our limitations, prejudices, hatreds, apathy, callousness, etc. are. That’s when Jesus starts to work with us on those things, too.
  - d. Is Jesus giving you an opportunity to go with him in loving a certain person? Or people group?