

Matthew Chapter 15

Verses 1-2a: (see Mark 7:1-23). "Of Jerusalem:" Apparently, the central religious leaders came to investigate the ministry and teaching of Jesus. "The tradition of the elders:" Many Jews of the Lord's time believed that, in addition to the written law of Moses, there was an oral law given to Moses on Sinai.

This oral law, they believed, was passed down from Moses by word of mouth until it reached the great synagogue or council of elders, which succeeded Ezra after the return from the Exile. This council seems to have been the source of the many additions to the law of God that have been found in Judaism, ancient and modern.

Verses 2b-9: "Wash not their hands:" The washing consisted of a ritual of pouring a trickle of cold water over the outstretched hands. The Jews were not concerned so much with cleanliness as with ritual. "Why do ye also transgress?" The Lord here shows that additions of the Word of God ultimately contradict it.

Matthew 15:1-2 "Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying," "Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread."

"The tradition of the elders": This was a body of extra biblical law that had existed only in oral form and only since the time of the Babylonian captivity. Later it was committed to writing in the Mishna near the end of the second century. The law of Moses contained no commandment about washing one's hands before eating, except for priests who were required to wash before eating holy offerings (Lev. 22:6-7).

These Pharisees were so caught up in formalism, that they could not understand anything but tradition. You see, this was not really what God had meant, but was rather part of the Pharisees' tradition.

Matthew 15:3 "But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?"

"Transgress": The nature of this sin is identified (in verses 4-6), as dishonoring one's parents in a cleverly devised way. The commandments of God were clear (quoted from Exodus 20:12; 21:17; Deut. 5:16); but to circumvent them, some people claimed they could not financially assist their parents because they had dedicated a certain sum of money to God, who was greater than their parents.

The rabbis had approved this exception to the commandments of Moses and thus in effect, nullified God's law (verse 6).

Matthew 15:4 "For God commanded, saying, Honor thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death."

“Honor thy father and mother”: This was a plain command of God, written with his own hand, and delivered by Moses to them; it was of a moral nature, and of eternal obligation: and to be understood, not merely of that high esteem parents are to be had in by their children, and of the respectful language and gesture to be used towards them.

And not only the cheerful obedience to be yielded to them; but also of honoring them with their substance, feeding, clothing, and supplying them with the necessaries of life, when they stand in need thereof; which is but their reasonable service. For all the care, expense, and trouble they have been at, in bringing them up in the world.

Matthew 15:5 "But ye say, Whosoever shall say to [his] father or [his] mother, [It is] a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me;"

When a parent's wants called for assistance, they pleaded, that they had devoted to the temple all they could spare, even though they did not part with it, and therefore their parents must expect nothing from them. This was making the command of God of no effect.

The doom of hypocrites is put in a little compass; In vain do they worship me. It will neither please God, nor profit themselves; they trust in vanity, and vanity will be their repayment.

Matthew 15:6 "And honor not his father or his mother, [he shall be free]. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition."

“And honor not his father or his mother”: It is true, father - mother, that by giving to thee this, which I now present, thou mightest be profited by me; but I have gifted it to pious uses, and therefore, at whatever cost to thee, I am not now at liberty to alienate any portion of it. "And," it is added in (Mark 7:12), "ye suffer him no more to do aught for his father or his mother." To dedicate property to God is indeed lawful and laudable, but not at the expense of filial duty.

Thus, have ye made the commandment of God of none effect, cancelled or nullified it "by your tradition."

You see these Pharisees, who were so caught up in every little detail of the law, only kept it at their convenience. If there was something difficult for them to do, like honoring parents, they just twisted it around to suit their own wants.

It is like preachers that say something is a sin in your life, but cannot recognize the very same thing as sin in their own lives. They, like the Pharisees, have a belief of convenience.

Matthew 15:7 "[Ye] hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying,"

This prophecy is found (in Isaiah 29:13).

Matthew 15:8 "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with [their] lips; but their heart is far from me."

“This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth”: The preface to these words, or the form in which they are introduced by the prophet; "wherefore the Lord said", is left out in this citation, being unnecessary here, though of the greatest importance there; partly to show, that what was about to be said, was not the prophet's own words, but the words of the Lord, of which the Jews in Christ's time made no doubt.

Also, partly to give a reason why that judicial blindness, threatened in the context, should be inflicted on them, which is no part of Christ's design here. But which is only to show, that the description here given exactly agrees with them, and so proves, and confirms the character he gives of them as hypocrites.

“And honoreth me with their lips”: they owned him to be their creator and preserver; they made their boast of him, and of their knowledge of him, as the one only living, and true God, and as the God of Israel; they brought their sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, even the fruit of their lips, unto him, for their many peculiar mercies, privileges, and favors, as a nation, church, and people, and with much seeming sincerity and affection.

“But their heart is far from me”: They had no true love to God, nor faith in him, nor fear of him; they were not at all concerned for his presence with them, or for communion with him, or for his honor and glory; their hearts were in the world, and after their covetousness. They made religion a tool to their secular purposes, supposing gain to be godliness; sought the applause of men, and contented themselves with bodily exercise;

Having no regard to internal religion, powerful godliness, or where their hearts were, so be it, their bodies were presented to God in public worship. And what they did it was to be seen and approved of men, not caring what the searcher of hearts knew concerning them, or what he required of them.

Here again, God does not want us to be like a robot going through all the formalism. He does not want us to talk a good belief in Him, but to truly believe way down deep in our hearts. As I have said so many times before, we must be in love with Jesus, not just obeying Him systematically. He wants our hearts to be stayed on Him.

Matthew 15:9 "But in vain they do worship me, teaching [for] doctrines the commandments of men."

Can you see here, that most doctrines of churches are produced out of the minds of men? God is displeased with our doctrines that separate His people. He will not accept this type of worship. Jesus wants our love.

Matthew 15:10 "And he called the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand:"

He was saying here, do not just listen with your physical ear, but with your spiritual ear, and let this become part of your knowing.

Matthew 15:11 "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man."

“That which cometh out of the mouth ... defileth a man”: People might defile themselves ceremonially (under the Old Covenant), by eating something unclean, but they would defile themselves morally by saying something sinful (James 3:6).

Here Jesus clearly distinguished between the law’s ceremonial requirements and its inviolable moral standard. Ceremonial defilement could be dealt with through ceremonial means. But moral defilement corrupts a person’s soul.

You see, when you eat with unwashed hands, you harm no one but yourself. All of this will be carried out as waste from the body. When we speak evil things out of our mouths which originate in the heart, we sometimes hurt someone else so badly, that the damage is permanent.

Our witness becomes totally ineffective when those around us see how bad our hearts are. Bitter and sweet water cannot come from the same well (James 3:11). Whatever is in your heart, will come out.

Matthew 15:12 "Then came his disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?"

They had given vent to their irritation, and perhaps threats, not to our Lord Himself, from whom they seem to have slunk away, but to some of the disciples, who report it to their Master.

These Pharisees were so self-righteous, that they were beyond receiving instruction. When a person gets that far along, he or she is in bad shape. The Pharisees were like many in the churches today. They were full of formalism, without any power or closeness to God.

2 Timothy 3:5 "Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away."

Matthew 15:13 "But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up."

"But he answered, and said": As being unconcerned at their rage, and having nothing to fear from them; and being well satisfied, that what he had said was right, and would produce proper effects, he gave his disciples this for answer:

“Every plant which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up”: which may be understood either of things, or of persons. It may have regard to doctrines and ordinances; and the meaning be, that whatever doctrine is not delivered by God, or whatever ordinance is not instituted by him; whatever is not of heaven, but of man.

Of man's devising, and of human imposition, as the traditions of the elders, must be opposed and rejected; and sooner or later will be utterly rooted up, and destroyed; as will all the false notions, corrupt worship, and errors, and heresies of men, in God's own time.

Matthew 15:14 "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch."

“Let them alone”: This severe judgment is a form of God’s wrath. It signifies abandonment by God and is described as “giving them over” (in Romans 18:32; Hosea 4:17).

This is a sad statement about the condition of some of our churches today. The preacher has watered down the truth of God to such an extent, that people who attend his church are following right down the road with the preacher, and they both will fall.

A spiritual blind person cannot lead you into a spiritual relationship with Jesus.

Verses 15-20: Peter, acting on behalf of the others, asks for an explanation of the saying that had given such offense. Our Lord proceeds to elaborate the teaching for their benefit. “Draught” (Greek uphedron) means literally “latrine.”

“They defile.” The word “they” is emphatic. “Evil thoughts”: are evil schemes. “Blasphemies” refers not only to blasphemy in the modern, narrow sense of the word, but also to criticism or libel of others.

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

“This parable”: I.e., (verse 11). The “parable” is not at all hard to understand, but it was hard for even the disciples to accept. Years later, Peter still found it hard to accept that all foods are clean (Acts 10:14).

Remember at this time, Peter and the other disciples had not received the Holy Spirit. Jesus still had to explain the parables to them. Their understanding had not been opened.

Matthew 15:16 "And Jesus said, Are ye also yet without understanding?"

“And Jesus said”: As wondering at, and as being displeased with, and as reproofing them for their dullness and ignorance: are ye also yet without understanding? You my disciples, as well as the Scribes and Pharisees; you, who have been with me so long.

Who have heard so many discourses from me, who for so long a time have been instructed by me, both in private, and in public; and yet do not understand what is so plain and easy, that has nothing of difficulty in it, but what might easily be accounted for.

Matthew 15:17 "Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught?"

"Do ye not understand": The meaning of this may be thus expressed: The food which is eaten does not affect the mind, and therefore cannot pollute it.

The doctrine of the Pharisees, that neglect of washing and of similar observances defiles a man, cannot be true. Those things pertain to the body as much as food does, and they cannot affect the soul.

Matthew 15:18 "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man."

Meaning not material things, as spittle, vomit, etc., but as it follows, which come forth from the heart: are first conceived and formed there, and then come forth from thence, and are expressed by the mouth; as all idle words, foolish talking, filthy jesting, unsavory communication, and every word that is rotten and corrupt, or which is done in the life and conversation.

"And they defile the man": the heart is the corrupt fountain from whence all moral defilement flows; and sinful words and actions are the impure streams, which spring from thence, and increase the moral pollution of human nature.

Matthew 15:19 "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies:"

"Out of the heart": In the heart of an unregenerate man, the principles and seeds of all sin are found. And iniquity is always conceived in the heart before it be spoken or acted. Is there any hope that a man can abstain from outward sin till his heart, that abominable fountain of corruption, is thoroughly cleansed?

All wicked imaginations, carnal reasoning, lustful desires, and malicious contrivances, are here included; which take their rise from, and are devised, and forged, in the corrupt heart of man.

Matthew 15:20 "These are [the things] which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man."

"These ... defile a man": Our Lord's argument is very plain. What goes into the mouth descends into the stomach and other intestines; part is retained for the nourishment of the body, and part is ejected, as being improper to afford nourishment.

Nothing of this kind defiles the soul, because it does not enter into it; but the evil principles that are in the heart, producing evil thoughts, murders, etc., these defile the soul, because they have their seat and operation in it.

You see these Pharisees looked on the outward appearance to judge. Jesus looks on the heart of the inner man.

Verses 21-25: The second withdrawal of Jesus followed John's death and further rejection by the religious leadership of Israel. Thus, Jesus actually left the country and went into parts of "Tyre and Sidon," leaving Herod's jurisdiction to retire to Phoenicia for a time of seclusion. This was interrupted by the "woman of Canaan" (literally, "Canaanitish woman").

Mark 7:26 calls her a Syrophenician woman. The word translated "coasts" (Greek "mere"), means "districts." This is the only known occasion during His ministry that the Lord went outside the boundaries of Palestine. The woman was a Gentile and descended from the Canaanites who inhabited Syria and Palestine before the conquest of the latter by Joshua.

Matthew 15:21 "Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon."

From the land of Gennesaret, after he had silenced the Pharisees, as to the charge brought by them against his disciples; and when he had reproved them for their hypocrisy and wickedness, in making void the commands of God by their traditions.

Jesus had explained some difficult and parabolical sayings he had made use of to his disciples, he then left that country, and departed very privately; either to shun the multitude, for the sake of retirement, or to avoid any snares the Scribes and Pharisees might be laying for him, who must be greatly galled with his free discourse, and strong arguments.

Matthew 15:22 "And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, [thou] son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil."

"A woman of Canaan": Canaan was also called Syrophenicia, as lying between Syria properly so called, and Phoenicia, by the sea side. "Cried to him". From afar, thou Son of David, So she had some knowledge of the promised Messiah.

"O Lord, thou son of David": It is remarkable that two of the brightest examples of faith seen in the ministry of Christ were exhibited by Gentiles, that of the centurion (Matt 8:8-10), and of this woman. The fact that the latter addresses Jesus as the son of David shows that she knew of the prophecies concerning the Christ and that he would be the son of David.

"My daughter is grievously vexed with a devil": which had took possession of her, and most grievously afflicted her: and her request to him was, that he would cast him out of her: believing he had power so to do, without seeing or touching her, only by a word.

Matthew 15:23 "But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us."

"But he answered her not a word": This was done to test her faith and that there might be exhibited to the apostles an example of the effect of persevering supplication. The result shows

that it was not unwillingness to aid her, or neglect of her. It was proper that the strength of her faith should be fully tried.

This woman, by the Israelite law, was unclean, and an Israelite was not even to speak to a Canaanite. This woman was desperate. She was to the point of begging. She had heard the fame of Jesus, and knew if there was help anywhere; it had to be through Jesus. She called Him Son of David (saying by this that He was indeed, an Israelite).

Matthew 15:24 "But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

“But he answered and said, I am not sent”: This answer was made to the woman, not to the disciples. The "lost sheep of the house of Israel" were the Jews. He came first to them. He came as their expected Messiah. He came to preach the gospel himself to the Jews only. Afterward it was preached to the Gentiles, but the ministry of Jesus was confined almost entirely to the Jews.

Matthew 15:25 "Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me."

“Then came she and worshipped him”: She followed the disciples into the house; and perceiving another repulse by Christ's answer to them, she pushes on, through all discouragements; her faith grows stronger, and her importunity greater: she had called Christ Lord, and the son of David before, but now she worships him as God:

Saying, “Lord help me”; a short petition, but what fully and fitly expressed her case: the object she prays unto is the Lord, by which she owns his sovereignty, dominion, and power: the request she makes is for "help", signifying that her case required it; that it was such, that she could not help herself, nor any creature help her, only he, which she firmly believed.

Verses 26-28: By “children” the Lord means Jews, and by “dogs,” Gentiles. His attitude was intended to test the woman’s faith, which was rewarded by a miraculous healing. The term used for dogs (Greek kuhariois), means little dogs (pets), not wild, scavenging beasts.

She replied that such “dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master’s table.” She knew what could be hers, even as a Gentile, and thus became an illustration of millions of Gentiles, who would later be blessed by Israel’s Messiah. “Great is thy faith.” Jesus again commends Gentile belief (8:10).

Matthew 15:26 "But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast [it] to dogs."

“The Children’s bread”: The lost sheep of the house of Israel must be fed before the “little dogs”. Christ employed a word here that speaks of a family pet. His words with this woman are not to be understood as harsh or unfeeling. In fact, He was tenderly drawing from her an expression of her faith (in verse 27).

Matthew 15:27 "And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."

“And she said, Truth, Lord”: What you say is true. Let it be that the best food should be given to the children, let the Jews have the chief benefit of thy ministry; but the dogs beneath the table eat the crumbs. So let me be regarded as a dog, a pagan, as unworthy of everything. Yet grant one exception of that almighty power displayed so signally among the Jews, and heal the despised daughter of a despised heathen mother.

She was not arguing that her people had a good record of following God. In fact, she admitted that her heritage was not of God. She appealed to Jesus' sympathy. She said, I will wait around and just take the leftover blessings as you feed others. She had great humility and faith.

Matthew 15:28 "Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great [is] thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."

“Great is thy faith”: That is, thy trust, confidence. The word here seems to include also, the humility and perseverance manifested in pressing her suit. The daughter was healed then. Going home, she found her well and composed (Mark 7:30).

One thing that really gets results from God is our great faith in Jesus and His ability to perform miracles. Jesus just spoke the Word, and the woman's daughter was made whole. Notice, though, that this woman had to persist in her request.

We read (in James the fifth chapter), that "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." God needs to know that we are serious about our prayer requests, and He will answer our prayers. It is okay to pray more than once about something.

Matthew Chapter 15 Questions

1. These scribes and Pharisees were from what city?
2. What did they accuse the disciples of doing?
3. These Pharisees were caught up in what?
4. How did Jesus answer them?
5. Those who curse father and mother were to do what in the law?
6. How did the Pharisees keep the law?
7. When did the Pharisees keep the law?
8. Compare this with some modern preachers?

9. What did Jesus call them?
10. Isaiah said these people draweth nigh unto me with their _____ but their _____ is far from me.
11. Jesus wants what to be stayed on Him?
12. In verse nine, what were they teaching?
13. In verse ten, name two things we should do.
14. What defileth a man?
15. What really was the problem of the Pharisees?
16. The description in 2 Timothy 3:5 says what?
17. If the blind lead the blind, what happens?
18. Why did Peter not understand?
19. Words that come out of the mouth originate where?
20. The woman that come to Jesus was from where?
21. What was wrong with her daughter?
22. Why had she come to Jesus?
23. Who was Jesus sent to?
24. What did she call Jesus?
25. What were unbelievers often called?
26. What did she admit to Jesus about her heritage?
27. What two things did she show in herself?
28. Why did Jesus heal her daughter?
29. Are we to pray more than once for the same thing?