

Ministry of Grace

Matthew 15

Preface:

Last week we learned about Jesus' feeding of the 5,000, or actually, the 10,000 and we learned about Him successfully walking on the water accompanied by Peter's failure. These are two of the best known miracles that He performed. Jesus was able to do these miraculous things without any interference from the Pharisees. This week we will see him directly confronting the Pharisees and we will see Him reaching out to some Gentiles.

Traditions vs. Commandments

Matthew 15:1-9

¹Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." ³He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' ⁵But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," ⁶he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. ⁷You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ⁸"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁹in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

Mark 7:1-13 – ¹Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ²they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) ⁵And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" ⁶And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' ⁸You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." ⁹And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' ¹¹But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)-- ¹²then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

Notes:

The first thing to notice here is that the scribes and Pharisees who came to Jesus were sent from Jerusalem. They were probably a delegation sent specifically by the Sanhedrin, having heard of the amazing things Jesus had done. However, they were not there to observe and bring back news of what was happening. They were sent to accuse and entrap Jesus. The specific issue that they intended to entrap him with in this case was the fact that His disciples did not wash their hands before eating (sounds like your mother talking, doesn't it?) They weren't concerned with cleanliness or germs. This was not a hand washing for sanitation purposes; it was a ceremonial cleansing as handed down from the elders. Their accusation was that Jesus and His disciples did not adhere to this particular part of the Traditions of the Elders.

The Pharisees said that these traditions were originally part of the "oral law." They believed that Moses gave the elders of Israel this oral law at the same time that he gave all of Israel the written law. This oral law was then passed down from generation to generation and augmented by teachings of well-respected rabbis until it was finally written down in what is called the Mishnah. In time, the Mishnah became more important and more authoritative than the original Law of Moses.

Notice that Jesus didn't defend the actions of His disciples. Instead, He responded with an accusation of His own and an example. His accusation was that by adhering to the traditions of the elders, they were actually breaking the written law. Part of the traditions was the practice of "Corban." The word simply means "a gift." If a Jew wanted to escape some financial responsibility, he would declare his goods to be "Corban — a gift to God." This meant he was free from other obligations, such as caring for his parents.

Then, Jesus gave an example of how they break the Law by obeying the traditions of the elders. The example Jesus gave is taken from the 5th commandment:

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. (Exodus 20:12)

Jesus said, "So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God." He then reinforced His accusation by quoting from Isaiah 29:13. Now, as is common in the New Testament, He was quoting from the Septuagint (Greek) version of the Old Testament, with a slightly different ending. However, the meaning is not altered by the version that Jesus pronounced.

And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, (Isaiah 29:13)

Clearly, Jesus did not appreciate their rituals, because they were actually contrary to the Word of God.

What Defiles a Person

Matthew 15:10-20

¹⁰And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." ¹²Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" ¹³He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable

to us." ¹⁶And he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."

Mark 7:14-23 – ¹⁴And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." ¹⁶[*If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*] ¹⁷And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²²coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Notes:

After calling the people to Himself, Jesus explained that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out. Now, before you point your finger at your mother and say, "See, Jesus says it's not important to wash hands before eating," remember that Jesus is not talking about sanitation; He is talking about ceremonial cleanliness. The word translated "defiles" is *koinoō*, which is based on the noun *koinos*. This word means "common." It is used in two senses. The first is that which is common among all people, such as the common Greek language. It was the form of Greek that was spoken throughout the Roman world (thus, it is referred to as Koine Greek). The second sense of this word is "that which is ceremonially unclean." Since the scribes and Pharisees were all about ceremony, they did all they could to avoid such uncleanness.

Jesus' disciples, still fearing the political power of the scribes and Pharisees, informed Jesus that the scribes and Pharisees were offended by this teaching. However, Jesus' focus was not on politics. His focus was on doing the will of the Father. His response was, keep your focus on heavenly things, not earthly things and God the Father will take care of the scribes and Pharisees.

Now, when Peter asked Jesus to explain this parable, he patiently explained that anything taken into the body via the mouth gets digested and eliminated. It doesn't defile a person ceremonially. However, that which comes out of the mouth (our speech) does. That is to say, since what we say (and do) is a reflection of what we are in our innermost being (in our heart), then our words are evidence of our uncleanness (sinfulness).

The Faith of the Canaanite Woman

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." ²³But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶And he

answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Mark 7:24-30 – ²⁴ And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. ²⁵ But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

Notes:

Jesus had come as the Messiah to the people of Israel. But because the scribes and Pharisees were pursuing Him from Jerusalem, he headed to Gentile country, the area of Tyre and Sidon, where He knew the scribes and Pharisees would not go. According to Mark, He entered a house there and did not want anyone to know. But while He was there he was approached by a Canaanite woman. Mark calls her Syrophenician by birth. This implies that she was born of parents, one of whom was a Syrian and the other a Phoenician. Clearly, this woman was not a Jew.

She called out to Jesus and referred to Him by a Messianic title, Son of David, but He did not respond to her. Was He ignoring her because she was a Gentile? I don't think so. His disciples then begged Him to send her away. They weren't saying, "get rid of this pesky woman," they were saying "give her what she wants so she will go away." Jesus' response indicates that His current ministry was to Jews, not to Gentiles.

Obviously, she heard what He said and came and fell on her knees before Him saying simply, "Lord, help me." She did not use His messianic title. She simply called Him, "Lord." This time He responded to her. It appears that He ignored the woman initially because she was trying to come to Him the way a Jew would (calling Him "Son of David.") The second time, she came to Him as a sincerely humble servant recognizing Him as her Lord. She was still a Gentile, but He responded. This time He explained that it is not right to give that which is intended for the Jews to the Gentiles. Incidentally, the word "dogs" is *kunarium*, meaning "little puppy dog," which is different from what the Pharisees called Gentiles. That word is *kuōn*, meaning "a wild dog." The word that Jesus used implies a pet dog.

The woman obviously recognized that Jesus was being kind so she responds that even pet dogs eat the scraps that fall from their owner's table. In effect, she was saying, "I know I'm not a Jew, but if they reject what you have to offer, please let me have some of it." Jesus, recognizing her faith and her attitude, commended her on her great faith and then granted her wish.

Jesus Heals Many **Matthew 15:29-31**

²⁹ Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. ³⁰ And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, ³¹ so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.

Mark 7:31-37 – ³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. ³⁴ And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵ And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Notes:

Returning from the region of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus headed to the east side of the Sea of Galilee. Why did He go to Tyre? And, why now go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee? He probably did this to get out of the region controlled by Herod Antipas (he was ruler of Galilee and Perea). The area to the East of the Sea of Galilee and the area to the south of it is referred to as the Decapolis, meaning "Ten Cities." This area includes the region of Gadara and Gerasa, where Jesus cast out the legion of demons from a man (see **Matthew 8:28-34**). On the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus healed the people who were brought to Him. The healings included opening the ears of the deaf, giving speech to the mute, giving sight to the blind, and healing the crippled and lame.

On the surface, this doesn't seem any different than the healings He has performed previously (see **Matthew 9:1-8, 18-34**). What is significant regarding the healings in this chapter is the fact that He was healing Gentiles! The Jews were rejecting Him, so He began turning to the Gentiles. Remember what He told the Peter previously? He said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Even though He was sent as the Messiah of Israel, His ministry has now changing and He is demonstrating that a relationship with Yahweh is not limited to Israel. Anyone who will come in humble faith can receive the blessings that only He can give.

And, what was the result of Jesus' healing these Gentiles? "they glorified the God of Israel." If you recall, the original purpose of God revealing Himself to Abraham was to be a blessing to all nations. Israel was supposed to evangelize the world. Instead of sharing the blessings of God with the world, they isolated themselves from the rest of the world, thinking that only they deserved to be blessed. Now the Gentiles are receiving God's blessings and they are giving Him the praise He deserves.

Jesus Feeds the Four Thousand

Matthew 15:32-39

³² Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way." ³³ And the disciples said to him,

"Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?"

³⁴And Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish." ³⁵And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, ³⁶he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ³⁷And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. ³⁸Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. ³⁹And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan (Magdala).

Mark 8:1-10 – ¹In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, ²"I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. ³And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. ⁴And some of them have come from far away." And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" ⁵And he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." ⁶And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. ⁷And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. ⁸And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. ⁹And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. ¹⁰And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

Notes:

First of all, let me say that there are some critics of the Bible who claim that this feeding of the 4,000 is actually the same miracle as the feeding of the 5,000 and these naysayers use this supposed "fact" to prove that the Bible is filled with errors. However, there are several clues in the text that give evidence that they are two separate events. The feeding of the 5,000 was near Bethsaida, whereas the feeding of the 4,000 was in the Decapolis. Well, these two locations are in the same general area, so maybe they aren't different miracles. But wait! The 5,000 were Jews and these 4,000 were Gentiles. The 5,000 were fed from 5 loaves and 2 fish, with 12 baskets left over. The 4,000 were fed from 7 loaves and "a few" fish, with 7 baskets left over. The 5,000 were with Jesus for 1 day. The 4,000 were with Jesus for 3 days. After the 5,000 Jews were fed they tried to make Him king, but there was no such reaction from the 4,000 Gentiles. Clearly, these are two separate miracles.

One more interesting fact: The baskets full that were left over in the feeding of the 5,000 were lunch baskets. This is from the Greek word *kophinos*, which is a Jewish designation for a "lunch basket" or a "traveling basket." The baskets full in the feeding of the 4000 is from the Greek word *spuridas*, which is a Greek designation for a storage basket large enough for a person to fit in (this is the type of basket in which the Apostle Paul was let down from the wall in [Acts 9:25](#)). Thus, the 7 baskets full left over from the feeding of the 4,000 Gentiles was a lot more than the 12 baskets left over from the feeding of the 5,000 Jews.

So What?

The members of the delegation sent from the Pharisees were offended because Jesus' disciples did not perform the ceremonial washing of their hands before eating. But Jesus taught them that this ceremonial cleansing did nothing for them. This practice was traditional, formal, liturgical,

ceremonial, religious practice. It fit in well with the “religion” of the Pharisees, but it had nothing to do with the Law. Their “religion” consisted of performing various acts and actions that demonstrated how religious they were. So, what is religion and what does it mean to be religious? According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

Religion is – an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god ...

I would make a slight adjustment to that definition.

Religion is – an organized, man-made system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god ...

By that definition, Christianity is not a religion, but many Christians and many churches are religious. God doesn't want religious followers, He wants a relationship, with humble, committed servants.

A little more than 25 years ago, Conie and I moved to rural western New York State. It was a small town in a remote part of New York where there were more cows than people. Most of the people who lived in the town worked for the one major business there and went to the only Christian Church in town. It was a church fairly typical of churches 50 years earlier. You know what I mean. The type of church that had two services each Sunday morning, a “regular” service and a contemporary service. The “regular” service could be best described as traditionally formal and liturgical. In other words, the format of the service was always the same. They always sang the same opening song, they always recited the Lord's Prayer at the proper time in the service, the sermon was always ended with the same benediction, the songs were all out of the hymnal, they usually sang all verses and sang the “amen” at the end of the songs. The offering was always concluded with the singing of “Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow.” The closing song was always the same, and the people always sat in the same seats. You could even tell who was not in attendance on any given Sunday because their seats were empty.

Now, I'm not saying that the church we attended there was all of these things, but it had a number of these characteristics. I often asked God just why He wanted us to be part of that church. After being there for several years, He finally revealed to me why He wanted us there. There were a couple of families in that church who were genuine Christians and they demonstrated it by their love for God and their love for others. He showed me that even in a church like that, there were some real Christians. Up till that point I thought that if you weren't a Baptist you probably weren't a born again believer. Boy was I closed minded! I was so busy being critical of their formalism that I became my own type of Pharisee.

“Hello, my name is Will and I am a recovering Pharisee.”

Unfortunately, there are a lot of churches today that are caught in the same Pharisaic trap as that church in rural New York State. Some of them are even “Fundamental” Baptist churches.

Don't get me wrong. We should not be overly critical of other churches and the way they practice their faith, but Jesus was. He was clearly critical of the way the Pharisees practiced their religion. He specifically pointed to their doctrine, or lack thereof. He even quoted Isaiah as a description of their religious practices when He said,

[in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.](#)

I know that in some Christian circles the word “doctrine” is an evil word, but even Jesus stressed the fact that correct doctrine is important. I'm not talking about minor issues like, “what is the proper manner of baptism,” or “what type of songs are appropriate for worship,” or “how long

should a woman's skirt be," or even "are all the gifts of the Spirit active today." What I'm referring to as sound doctrine is teaching what the Bible says, instead of explaining away clear teachings of the New Testament as irrelevant because "they lived in a different culture than we do today." Jesus clearly condemned the notion of replacing doctrine with man-made traditions and we need to be careful that we don't do the same thing.

Another trap that a lot of Christians fall into is formalism. When I first got saved and joined a church, I attended every service including the Wednesday evening prayer meeting. I didn't pray out loud, though, because I hadn't yet learned the proper prayer language and when to use thee and thou and thine. It wasn't until years later that I discovered that God doesn't care about the formalism. He doesn't care about the words. He only cares about the heart.

The Canaanite woman's experience with Jesus is a good example of what formalism produces. She tried to use the proper Jewish form of addressing the Messiah by calling Him "Son of David." Not only did that not get the response she wanted, it got her ignored. But, when she approached Jesus as a humble, undeserving servant, He responded to her. Did you catch that? When the Gentile woman approached Jesus as a humble, undeserving servant, He responded to her.

We need to approach God in the same way, in sincere humility, with an honest realization of who and what we are and who and what He is. We have all developed our own concept of what a Christian is, and how we are supposed to live as children of God. But how much of that is formalism and ritual and how much of that is genuine, humble submission to the Creator of heaven and earth?

Now What?

What is it that I expect from each of you? Well, nothing, really! I expect nothing except what God prompts you to do. What do I desire for you? Now, that is a different question altogether. I have several desires for each one of you. First of all, my desire is that each and every one of you is genuinely saved. I hope and pray that each of you has, at some point in your life, come to God with the recognition that you are a sinner alienated from Him, that you have accepted the blood of Christ shed on the cross as payment for your sins, and that you recognize Jesus Christ as both your Savior and your Lord. Secondly, my desire for you is that you give up the steering wheel of your life and put God in the driver's seat. That means accepting what God has allowed to come into your life, the good, the bad, and, yes, even the ugly. And – accepting what your life is right now, with all the troubles and blessings, not focusing on the troubles, but focusing on the blessings. I want you to turn it all over to your Lord and seek His face. But, you can't do this without talking to Him regularly. Thirdly, my desire for you is that you get to know our God better by spending regular, consistent time reading His word. And finally, my desire for you is that you commit to accepting and following His will for your life instead of your own.

The bottom line is – when we reach the end of this life, my prayer is that none of us will hear, "Depart from Me, I never knew you." Instead, I pray that each one of us in this room will hear, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

Let's pray.

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