

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 18: The Tradition of Men; the Canaanite Woman

Matthew 15:1-39

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, Matthew 15 is about authority and the human heart. Jesus draws a hard line between the commandment of God and the traditions of men, and He insists that when the two collide, God's word wins every time. This is the foundation for everything we believe about the authority of Scripture as the pattern for the church. The Pharisees were not pagans; they were devout men who had simply allowed their own additions to swallow up the actual word of God. Your students need to see that the danger is not only the obvious sin of rebellion, but the subtle drift of replacing what God said with what we prefer, all while feeling very religious about it. The second half of the chapter then drives the diagnosis home: the real defilement is not external but internal. Sin is a heart problem, which means salvation must reach the heart, something no ritual of men can ever accomplish.

But this chapter is not only an argument; it is also a portrait of mercy that will form your students' hearts. The same Jesus who refuses to soften the truth for the experts from Jerusalem bends low to a desperate Gentile mother who has nothing but her faith. The contrast is deliberate and beautiful. The insiders who trusted their tradition went away offended; the outsider who trusted Jesus went home with her daughter healed. The lesson aims to expose every hollow, hand-washing religion in us and to draw us toward the kind of humble, stubborn, "Lord, help me" faith that actually lays hold of Christ.

So teach for both. Help your class measure their religious life by God's word rather than by inherited habits and human expectations. And then lead them to the feet of Jesus with the Canaanite woman, until they marvel that His mercy is wide enough to reach people like them, and learn to keep coming to Him even when the answer seems slow.

Question 1

Student Question:

When the Pharisees accuse His disciples of breaking "the tradition of the elders," Jesus charges them with breaking "the commandment of God" for the sake of their tradition (15:3, 6). What is the difference between the two, and what does this teach us about the authority of God's word over human rules in worship and life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the scene carefully. The "tradition of the elders" was a body of oral rules that had grown up around the law of Moses, intended as a fence to protect the law but increasingly treated as

binding in its own right. The hand-washing in view here was not about cleanliness but about ceremonial purity, a man-made requirement nowhere commanded in the law of God. The Pharisees were not defending Scripture; they were defending their additions to it.

Notice Jesus' move. He does not debate the merits of the tradition. He immediately raises the stakes to the level of authority: "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (v. 3). The issue is not custom versus custom. It is the word of God versus the word of men, and Jesus will not let the two be treated as equals.

This is where you anchor the lesson in the authority of Scripture. God's word carries an authority that no human tradition, however old or beloved, can ever share. When a tradition merely helps us obey God, it is harmless and may be useful. But the moment a tradition is bound on people as though it were God's command, or used to set aside what God actually said, it has become an idol. The New Testament is our pattern; we have no right to add to it or subtract from it.

Apply this with humility. It is easy to point at the Pharisees and miss ourselves. Every congregation accumulates customs, good and bad, and the test is always the same: does this practice rest on the authority of God's word, or have we begun to treat our preferences as His commands? Teach your class to love Scripture enough to let it correct even cherished habits.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The authority of God's word over every human tradition (15:3, 6; Colossians 2:8)
- The difference between a helpful custom and a binding tradition that displaces Scripture
- Scripture, especially the New Testament, as the authoritative pattern for the church (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- The danger of adding to or subtracting from what God has actually commanded (Revelation 22:18–19)
- Reverence for God's word that is willing to let it correct our own habits

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between a tradition that helps us obey God and one that replaces His word?
- Why are we so quick to defend our own customs and so slow to examine them by Scripture?
- How can a congregation tell when a practice has crossed from helpful habit into binding tradition?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus says some of the religious leaders honored Him “with their lips,” while their hearts were far from Him (15:8). Where in your own walk are you most tempted to settle for outward religious motions while your heart drifts somewhere else?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and it cuts close. Jesus quotes Isaiah: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (v. 8). The tragedy is not that these worshipers were irreligious. They were extremely religious. The tragedy is the gap between the mouth and the heart.

Help students feel how easily this happens. We can sing the words while our minds wander to the afternoon. We can bow our heads in prayer and rehearse our worries instead of seeking God. We can attend faithfully, give regularly, and serve dependably, and still let our hearts drift far from the One we claim to worship.

The goal here is honest self-examination, not despair. The remedy for lip-service is not to abandon the outward forms but to bring the heart back to them. Worship was always meant to be the overflow of a heart that loves God, not a substitute for it.

Invite students to name, even silently, the place where their religious life has become routine. Then point them gently back to the Lord. The same Jesus who exposes the gap is the one who draws near to close it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between outward religion and a heart truly turned toward God (Isaiah 29:13)
- Worship as the overflow of love for God, not a substitute for it
- The subtle drift from devotion into mere routine
- The call to bring the heart, and not only the body, into worship

Discussion Prompts

- Where has your worship become routine rather than the overflow of a loving heart?
- What helps you re-engage your heart when you catch yourself going through the motions?
- How can we encourage one another toward heartfelt worship without becoming judgmental?

Question 3

Student Question:

Quoting Isaiah, Jesus says, “in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (15:9). What makes worship vain or empty in God’s eyes, and how can a congregation guard against drifting in that direction?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus delivers a sobering verdict: “in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (v. 9). The word “vain” means empty, useless, accomplishing nothing. Worship can be sincere, energetic, and still be empty in God’s sight. That should sober every one of us.

Draw out the two things that emptied their worship. First, their hearts were far from God even as their lips drew near. Second, they were teaching human commandments as though they carried divine authority. Empty worship, then, has both a heart problem and an authority problem. It is worship offered with a divided heart and built on human invention rather than God’s revelation.

This is where you can gently reinforce the New Testament pattern for worship. We worship as the Lord has directed, on the first day of the week, devoting ourselves to the apostles’ teaching, to prayer, to singing, to giving, and to the Lord’s Supper around His table (Acts 2:42; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). We have no authority to set those aside in favor of innovations of our own, nor to bind on others what God has not bound.

Lead the class to apply this to themselves before they apply it to anyone else. A congregation guards against empty worship not by becoming more rigid, but by keeping both heart and pattern aligned with God: hearts truly engaged, and practices truly grounded in His word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship can be sincere yet vain when it follows the commandments of men (15:9)
- Empty worship as both a heart problem and an authority problem
- Worship offered according to the New Testament pattern (Acts 2:42; Acts 20:7)
- The Lord’s Supper observed on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 11:23–26)
- Engaging the heart while keeping worship grounded in God’s revelation, not human invention

Discussion Prompts

- What makes worship empty in God’s eyes, even when it feels sincere to us?
- How do we keep both our hearts and our practices aligned with what God has revealed?
- Why is it dangerous to teach our own preferences as though they were God’s commands?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus exposes how the leaders used a religious-sounding loophole to avoid caring for their own parents (15:4–6). Where might you be using busyness, or even spiritual-sounding excuses, to dodge a plain duty God has placed in front of you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus exposes a specific, devastating example of tradition swallowing up God's command. The law plainly says, "Honor your father and your mother" (v. 4). But the leaders had devised a workaround: a person could declare his resources "given to God" (Corban, as Mark tells us) and so be excused from using them to care for his aging parents. Religious language became a tool for shirking a plain duty.

Help students see the deeper pattern. The danger is not only blatant disobedience. It is using something that sounds spiritual to avoid an obligation God has clearly placed on us. The leaders were not robbing a bank; they were dressing up their selfishness in religious clothing.

Press the application honestly. We can do the same thing in subtler ways. We can be "too busy with ministry" to care for the people in our own homes. We can give money to a good cause and quietly neglect a needy parent, a struggling neighbor, or a duty God has set right in front of us. Spiritual-sounding excuses are still excuses.

Bring it home gently but specifically. Ask students to consider where a plain, God-given duty, often to family, is being crowded out by busyness or rationalization. Real obedience usually shows up first in the unglamorous responsibilities right under our noses.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The command to honor father and mother as a binding obligation (Exodus 20:12; 15:4)
- The danger of using religious language to avoid plain duties (15:5–6)
- Care for one's own family as a mark of genuine godliness (1 Timothy 5:4, 8)
- Obedience that begins in the ordinary, unglamorous responsibilities God has given us

Discussion Prompts

- Where might you be using busyness, even good busyness, to avoid a duty God has clearly given you?
- Why is it so tempting to dress up our excuses in spiritual language?
- What plain responsibility is God placing in front of you right now that you have been avoiding?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus teaches that defilement does not come from outside but from within: "out of the heart come evil thoughts" and the sins that follow (15:18–19). What does this reveal about the real nature of the human problem, and why can no external ritual fix it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here Jesus delivers the heart of His teaching, literally. He calls the crowd close and announces that it is not what enters the mouth that defiles a person but what comes out of it (v. 11). When the disciples report that the Pharisees were offended, He presses further: the things that come out of the mouth proceed from the heart, “and this defiles a person” (v. 18).

Then comes the unflinching list: “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (v. 19). Notice that Jesus locates the source of sin not in our circumstances, our upbringing, or our environment, but in the human heart itself. This is the real human problem.

This is profoundly important doctrine. If the problem were merely external, then external solutions, better rituals, stricter rules, cleaner habits, would be enough. But Jesus says the defilement is internal. No amount of hand-washing can cleanse a polluted heart. This is why we need more than reformation; we need a new heart, a salvation that reaches the inside.

Be careful not to leave students in despair, but also do not rush past the diagnosis. We cannot appreciate the cure until we feel the disease. The good news comes precisely here: the gospel offers exactly what ritual never could, a cleansing of the heart through Christ, the washing of regeneration, hearts made new by the blood of Jesus and the working of His Spirit. But that begins with admitting the problem is in us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin as a problem of the heart, not merely of external behavior (15:18–19)
- The inability of any external ritual to cleanse an unclean heart
- The biblical diagnosis of the human condition: defilement flows from within (Jeremiah 17:9; Mark 7:21–23)
- The need for inward cleansing and a new heart, not merely reformed behavior (Psalm 51:10; Titus 3:5)
- Why salvation must reach the inner person, something only Christ can accomplish

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that Jesus locates the source of sin in the heart rather than in our circumstances?
- How does this teaching expose the limits of trying to fix ourselves with rules and habits?
- What kind of cleansing does a defiled heart actually need, and where does it come from?

Question 6

Student Question:

If sin truly flows out of the heart, then surface-level fixes will never be enough. What is one heart attitude, hidden beneath your respectable behavior, that you sense Jesus wants to deal with?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question follows naturally from the diagnosis. If sin flows out of the heart, then the respectable, well-behaved Christian is not exempt. Beneath the surface of good manners and church attendance, the heart can still harbor pride, bitterness, lust, envy, or contempt.

Help students move past the obvious external sins to the hidden attitudes Jesus named: evil thoughts, slander, false witness, the heart's quiet murders and adulteries. Jesus is not interested only in the sins we have committed with our hands, but in the ones we nurse in the dark.

The aim is humble honesty, not morbid introspection. Encourage each person to ask the Spirit to surface one heart attitude that hides beneath their respectable behavior. It might be a grudge they have justified, a resentment they have fed, a secret contempt for someone, or a lust they have managed to keep private.

Then point them to grace. The purpose of seeing the heart clearly is not to wallow in guilt but to bring the real problem to the only One who can heal it. Naming the hidden thing is the first step toward letting Christ cleanse it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality of hidden heart-sins beneath respectable behavior
- The Spirit's work of convicting and exposing what we conceal (Psalm 139:23-24)
- Confession as the path from hidden sin to cleansing (1 John 1:9)
- The aim of self-examination: not despair but bringing the real problem to Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What hidden heart attitude do you sense Jesus wants to bring into the light?
- Why is it easier to manage outward behavior than to deal with the heart beneath it?
- What would it look like to bring that hidden thing honestly to Christ this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

The Canaanite woman, an outsider with no covenant claim, calls Jesus "Lord, Son of David" and will not stop seeking His mercy (15:22, 25). What does her story reveal about who Jesus came to save, and about the faith that lays hold of His grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The scene shifts dramatically. Jesus withdraws into Gentile territory near Tyre and Sidon, and a Canaanite woman comes crying out. Matthew chooses the loaded word "Canaanite" deliberately, recalling Israel's ancient pagan enemies. She is, by every conventional measure, the

ultimate outsider, and yet she addresses Jesus with a stunning confession: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David” (v. 22).

Note what her faith already grasps. She calls Him Lord. She uses the messianic title Son of David, a deeper insight than many in Israel showed. She comes not demanding her rights but begging for mercy, kneeling before Him: “Lord, help me” (v. 25). She has no covenant claim, no standing, nothing but her need and her faith.

This is where the chapter’s great contrast lands. The religious insiders, with every advantage of heritage and tradition, went away offended. The Gentile outsider, with no advantage at all, lays hold of Christ and goes home blessed. Faith, not pedigree, is what receives the mercy of God.

Use this to show your students who Jesus came to save. Though His earthly ministry focused first on Israel, His mercy was always reaching toward the nations, just as God promised Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. This woman is a preview of the gospel going to the whole world, and a picture of the kind of faith that receives it: humble, persistent, clinging to Christ alone.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith, not ethnic or religious pedigree, as the means of receiving God’s mercy (15:28)
- The Canaanite woman’s confession of Jesus as Lord and Son of David
- Mercy as the posture of true faith: not claiming rights but begging grace (15:25)
- Christ’s mercy reaching beyond Israel to the Gentiles, fulfilling God’s promise to bless all nations (Genesis 12:3; Ephesians 2:11–13)
- The contrast between offended insiders and a believing outsider

Discussion Prompts

- What does this woman’s confession of Jesus as Lord and Son of David reveal about her faith?
- Why is it significant that the outsider received mercy while the insiders went away offended?
- What does her story teach us about who Jesus came to save?

Question 8

Student Question:

This Gentile mother kept pressing in even when the first answer seemed to be a closed door. When God seems silent or slow, how do you tend to respond, and what would it look like to keep coming to Him without giving up?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on the woman's remarkable persistence. Her first cry seems to meet silence; "he did not answer her a word" (v. 23). Then the disciples urge Him to send her away. Then His words sound like a closed door. And still she keeps coming. She kneels. She presses in. She turns even His hard saying into an argument for grace.

Help students recognize themselves in that moment of seeming silence. When God does not answer quickly, we are tempted to conclude He does not care, or to give up praying altogether. We grow discouraged and drift away from the throne of grace just when we most need to draw near.

Hold up this woman as a teacher of prayer. She models a faith that refuses to let go, that keeps coming even when the answer is delayed, that meets apparent silence not with retreat but with deeper trust. Jesus called this "great faith," and it pleased Him.

Be careful and pastoral here. Persistence in prayer is not magic, and a delayed answer is not always a denied one. The point is not to twist God's arm but to keep our hearts turned toward Him, trusting His goodness even in the waiting. Encourage students to name a specific prayer they have been tempted to abandon, and to keep bringing it to the Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Persistence in prayer as an expression of faith, not a means of manipulating God (Luke 18:1–8)
- Trusting God's goodness even when the answer is delayed or silent
- Drawing near to the throne of grace in time of need (Hebrews 4:16)
- The difference between a delayed answer and a denied one

Discussion Prompts

- When God seems silent, what do you tend to conclude, and how does that affect your prayers?
- What prayer have you been tempted to give up on that you should keep bringing to God?
- How can we encourage one another to keep praying without losing heart?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 15:21–28 carefully. Jesus first tells the woman He was sent to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," yet He ends by marveling, "O woman, great is your faith!" and healing her daughter. How do you understand the way Jesus deals with her, and what does this account teach about persistent, humble faith and the reach of Christ's mercy beyond Israel to the Gentiles?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest question of the lesson, so take your time and read 15:21–28 slowly with the class. At first the exchange can seem harsh. Jesus answers the woman's cry with silence, then says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24), and then, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (v. 26). Many students will feel the difficulty here, so address it directly and reverently.

Help them understand the words in context. Jesus' earthly ministry did have a divinely ordered priority: the gospel came first to Israel, and only afterward to the nations (Romans 1:16). He was stating that order, not closing the door forever. And His word translated "dogs" is the gentler term for a household pet, not the wild scavenger. There is room in His tone for testing rather than rejection. He is drawing her faith out into the open, the way a good teacher poses a hard question not to crush but to reveal.

Now watch the woman's response, which is the high point of the whole account. She does not argue with Jesus or take offense; she humbly accepts her place and turns His own words into a plea for grace: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (v. 27). This is breathtaking faith. She asks for nothing but a crumb of His mercy, certain that even a crumb from this Lord is enough. She combines deep humility with bold persistence, and Jesus is delighted.

Then comes the verdict that crowns the chapter: "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (v. 28). In all of Matthew, only two people are praised for "great faith," and both are Gentiles. The woman who began as the ultimate outsider becomes a model of the faith Jesus longs to find. Her daughter is healed that very hour.

Gather up the doctrine for your students. This account teaches that genuine faith is humble, persistent, and clings to Christ's mercy even through testing and apparent delay. It teaches that Christ's mercy was never meant to stop at Israel's borders but was always reaching toward the Gentiles, fulfilling God's ancient promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham. And it teaches us how to come to Jesus ourselves: not with claims, not with pedigree, but kneeling, asking for mercy, and refusing to leave until we have it. The God who delighted in this woman's faith delights to be sought that way still.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus' ministry coming first to Israel and then reaching the Gentiles (15:24; Romans 1:16)
- The difference between testing faith and rejecting the one who seeks Him
- Faith that combines deep humility with bold persistence (15:27)
- Christ's commendation of "great faith" found in a Gentile outsider (15:28)
- God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham, fulfilled as the gospel reaches the world (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:8)
- The pattern of true faith: kneeling, asking mercy, and clinging to Christ alone
- The breadth of Christ's mercy, reaching even those with no covenant claim

Discussion Prompts

- How do you understand Jesus' hard-sounding words to the woman, and how does her response answer them?
- What does it mean that the only people Jesus praises for "great faith" in Matthew are Gentiles?
- How does this account shape the way you come to Jesus with your own deepest needs?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole chapter, from the empty tradition of the Pharisees to the great faith of the Canaanite woman. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to trade hollow, outward religion for a heart that truly trusts and worships Him this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole chapter and press it toward the heart. Matthew 15 set two pictures side by side: the empty, hand-washing religion of the Pharisees, sincere yet vain, and the humble, clinging faith of a Gentile mother that Jesus called great. The question is simple but searching: which one looks more like us?

Encourage students to be specific rather than general. A real answer might sound like: "I will stop measuring my spiritual life by attendance and start examining my heart," or "I will bring back to God the prayer I gave up on," or "I will deal honestly with the bitterness I have been hiding." Vague resolutions evaporate by Tuesday.

Let the chapter's contrast do its work. The danger is not that your students are irreligious; it is that, like the Pharisees, they might be very religious and far from God at the same time. The cure is to come like the Canaanite woman, kneeling, honest, asking for mercy, trusting Christ alone.

Close with worship rather than mere resolve. The wonder of this chapter is that the Lord who would not flatter the experts from Jerusalem stooped to bless a desperate outsider, and that He receives anyone, however far off, who comes to Him in humble faith. Lead your class to marvel that His mercy is wide enough to reach them, and to come and lay hold of it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The contrast between hollow outward religion and humble, heartfelt faith
- Self-examination that leads to specific, concrete change
- Coming to Christ in humility and trust as the pattern for the believer
- Worship and gratitude flowing from the wideness of Christ's mercy

Discussion Prompts

- Which picture in this chapter looks more like you right now, and why?
- What is one specific way you will trade hollow religion for real trust in Christ this week?
- How can this class pray for you as you take that step?