

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 18: The Tradition of Men; the Canaanite Woman -- Matthew 15:1-

39

A delegation has come all the way from Jerusalem. These are not local critics; they are the religious heavyweights, Pharisees and scribes who have traveled north to inspect this rabbi from Galilee. And what is their grave complaint? Not that Jesus has broken the law of God. Their accusation is smaller and stranger than that: "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat" (v. 2). Not dirty hands in the sense of hygiene, but a ceremonial ritual handed down by men, layered on top of the law of Moses until the layers nearly buried the law itself.

Watch how Jesus answers. He does not flinch and He does not negotiate. He turns their own question back on them like a mirror: "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (v. 3). Then He exposes the scheme. They had found a clever way to declare their money "given to God" so they would not have to use it to care for their aging parents, and in doing so they had voided the plain command to honor father and mother. "So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God" (v. 6). Isaiah saw it coming centuries before: "in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (v. 9).

Then Jesus calls the crowd close and says something that must have made the Pharisees gasp: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of it (v. 11).

Defilement is not a smudge on the hands; it is a sickness in the heart. "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (v. 19). The problem was never the dishes. The problem was us. And no ceremony invented by men can scrub that clean.

And then, in a sudden change of scene, Jesus withdraws to the region of Tyre and Sidon, Gentile country, and a Canaanite woman comes crying out for her demon-possessed daughter. She is everything the Pharisees were not: an outsider, a woman, a pagan by birth, with no claim on the covenant. Yet she will not stop calling Jesus "Lord, Son of David." She kneels. She presses in even when His first words sound like a closed door. And Jesus, who would not bend the truth for the experts from Jerusalem, marvels at her: "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (v. 28). The chapter that begins with empty religion ends with mercy reaching a desperate Gentile mother. That is the heart of God on display.

Group Discussion: Jesus tells the Pharisees that they have set aside the commandment of God in order to keep their own traditions. Why do you think human traditions, even well-meaning ones, can become so important to us that they quietly crowd out what God has actually said?

Personal Reflection: The Canaanite woman kept calling on Jesus even when His answer seemed to be no, refusing to let go until she received His mercy. Where in your own life are you tempted to give up on prayer, and what would it look like to press in with the kind of stubborn, humble faith she had?

Read Matthew 15:1–39

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 29:13, the warning against worship that honors God with the lips while the heart is far away; Mark 7:1–23, the parallel account of this same teaching on tradition and defilement; Colossians 2:20–23, against rules and regulations of human origin that have an appearance of wisdom; Proverbs 4:23, guarding the heart because from it flow the

springs of life; Ephesians 2:11-13, how those who were once far off, strangers to the covenant, are brought near by the blood of Christ.