

Dwelling in the Word

Prayerfully read Matt 15:1-28 and ask: 1) What words, phrases, or images stood out to you? 2) What does this say about what God desires to accomplish in you? 3) How could you respond to what God says in this passage?

Beginning the Conversation

1. Jesus disagreed with the Pharisees over the practice of ritual hand washing before eating. Have you ever experienced disagreement with other Christ followers over the importance of different practices or behaviours? (some big ones over the years include types of music used for worship, expectations regarding dress, types of entertainment, drinking alcohol, etc.). How did you resolve these disagreements?

Digging Deeper *(pick some of the following questions to discuss as a group)*

1. Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees from Jerusalem is an example of the increasing tension over the interpretation of Scripture. In Matthew, this is referred to how each respectively "bind" or "loose" Scripture (see 16:19; 18:18). Based on this passage as well as other times where Jesus and the Pharisee disagree over how Scripture should be "bound" and "loosed" (review 9:10-13; 12:1-8; 12:9-14; 16:1-4), what would you say is Jesus' focus in interpreting Scripture? (Recognizing, of course, that as Christ followers, Jesus' interpretation is paramount as it should guide our interpretation!)
2. Jesus initially did not respond to the Pharisees' challenge, but instead brought a charge against their interpretation of the laws surrounding gifts dedicated to God (see Lev 1:2; Num 7:12) and how their interpretation subverted the command to "Honour your father and mother" (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16). How did this illustrate Jesus' approach to Scripture? (see 12:8, 12; 23:23 and Mark 2:27). How do you approach the (apparent) competing demands of Scripture?
3. In 15:7-8, Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites and then quotes Isa 29:13 to back up his claim, because they give the appearance of obeying the will of God while in fact breaking it. How do you understand hypocrisy? How can we avoid hypocrisy in our walk with God?
4. Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite woman in 15:21-28, highlights both Jesus' understanding of his mission as the Jewish Messiah as well as his compassion on outsiders. How do Jesus' actions guide us in how we act towards outsiders?
5. The persistence and argument of the Canaanite woman impressed Jesus. The Psalms are full of examples of persistence in prayer, as are some of the teachings of Jesus (e.g., 7:7-11; Luke 18:1-8). How does persistent faith and prayer invite healing?

Living it Out

1. As we begin the season of Lent, are there some practices — whether giving up or adding something — you want to build into your life?
2. The persistence and great faith of the Canaanite woman can be an example to us. What are you desperate to receive from God?

Pharisees & Fisticuffs, and The Faith of a Canaanite (15:1-28)



Discourse 4
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Pastor Tyler Williams
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Pharisees & Fisticuffs

The Pharisees and Jesus Debate Purity & Defilement

- Some Pharisees come to question Jesus (15:1-2)
- Jesus Counter-Charge the Pharisees (15:3-9)
- Jesus Address the Crowd (15:10-11)
- Jesus Teaches his Disciples (15:12-20)

The Pharisees' Charge

"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" (15:2).

- Nothing to do with hygiene and everything to do with ritual purity.
- The "tradition of the elders" refers to the Pharisees' oral tradition, an interpretation of the laws that sought to put a "hedge" or "fence" around them (*mAvot* 1.1).
- Not really a debate of "Scripture vs. tradition," but more about interpreting — or "binding or loosing" — Scripture (cf. 16:19; 18:18).

The Pharisees' Charge

Ritual Purity in ancient Judaism

- Based on laws in Numbers and Leviticus, purity addressed things like food laws (Lev 11) and contact impurity laws (Lev 12-15; Num 19).
- Out of concern for holiness, the Pharisees extended passages about purity to public life and faith.
- The Pharisees extended the Levitical law for the ritual cleaning of hands of Priests before they serve to everyone in the blessing preceding the eating of meals (cf. Exod 30:17-21; Lev 15:11).

Jesus' Counter-Charge

"And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" (15:3).

- Jesus questions how their interpretation of the laws surrounding dedicating gifts to God (known as *qorban*; Lev 1:2; Num 7:12), violated a clear command of God, the fifth commandment: "honour you father and mother" (15:4; quoting Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16).
- The practice Jesus was criticizing was making a *qorban* vow and thereby not being able to support one's elderly parents.

Jesus' Views on Defilement & Purity

"Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them'" (15:11; cf. Mark 7:15).

Then later to his disciples, he said, "But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them" (15:18-20).

Jesus' Views on Defilement & Purity

Jesus Appeared Indifferent to Ritual Purity

- Jesus argued that you can follow rituals and observe dietary and other regulations, but still be defiled within — and inner purity is what is most important (see 23:25-26).
- Jesus' teaching and behaviour challenged the politics of purity: he touched and accepted persons whose physical condition made them unclean (8:1-4; 8:5-13; 9:20-22); he regularly ate with those who would be considered unclean (9:11; 11:19); he sided with the poor and marginalized, who because of their circumstances would often be considered unclean.

Jesus' Views on Defilement & Purity

Jesus' teaching is consistent with the Prophets before him who condemned those who "honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (15:8; quoting Isa 29:13).

- At the heart of the issue is hypocrisy, the art of seeming to be what one is not (e.g., the pretense of obeying the will of God while in fact breaking it).
- A second issue is they were in Jesus' estimation neglecting what is most important: "But you have neglected the more important matters of the law— justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (23:23).

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

Jesus Heals the Woman's Daughter (15:21-28)

- "Tyre and Sidon" – two self-governing cities on the Syrophenician coast, NW of Galilee.
- Identifying her as a "Canaanite" reinforces her outsider status (cf. Mark 7:26).
- Her request, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (15:22), recognizes both Jesus' authority and the undeserved nature of her ask.



The Canaanite Woman's Faith

Jesus Initially Rebuffs Her Request

- Jesus understood his own mission as one to "the lost sheep of Israel" (15:24; cf. 10:5-6).
- The initial stage in what will become the universal mission of the church in 28:18-20, which is described in the Book of Acts (1:8).
- Jesus' mission to Israel is a matter of God's faithfulness to Israel.

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

But She Persists, and Jesus Heals Her Daughter

- "The woman came and *worshipped* him, 'Lord, help me!' she said" (15:25, KJV, NLT; cf. 2:11; 14:33).
- In the second exchange, the woman recognizes the primacy of Israel in God's redemptive purposes and only asks for "crumbs" (15:27).
- Jesus marvelled at her "great faith" and healed her daughter (15:28; cf. 8:10-12).

Two Conclusions

Holiness & Purity

- Jesus desires us to live holy lives where our external behaviour is consistent with the inner state of our hearts and where we keep what is most important the most important.
- Jesus is the one who heals us of our impurities by taking our impurities on himself.

Two Conclusions

"At Calvary, Jesus the pure one, was made impure; there 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us'; there, his wounds brought about our healing. His life-giving and life-restoring ministry is possible because he became the sacrifice that removed all our impurities and made us clean" (Tidball, *Leviticus*, 169).

Two Conclusions

God's Undeserved Grace

- Jesus' eventual answering of the woman's request (15:28), as with the healing of the centurion's son (8:5-13), are exceptions in the ministry of Jesus that are at the same time anticipations of the ultimate goal of Jesus' mission to bring blessing to "all the families of the earth."
- "All things are yours... and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God!" (1Cor 3:21-23).