

Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and ministers to Gentiles

Matthew 15

Traditions and commandments (Matthew 15 v 1 to 9)

Jesus makes a clear distinction between the ‘tradition of the elders’ and ‘the commandment of God’. Many of the ‘traditions’ were embellishments on the Old Testament’s ceremonial laws. Washing one’s hands before a meal had nothing to do with hygiene, but ceremonial washings ordered by tradition. There were laws in the Torah for the priests, but here we are dealing with ordinary Jews, and there is nothing in God’s law that required such washings.

- How does Jesus answer the Pharisees’ question in v 2? What was the main complaint Jesus raised against the Pharisees’ approach to tradition? What lesson does Jesus draw from Isaiah 29 v 13?

Verses 4 to 6: the Jews of Jesus’ day had a way to get around the commandment to honour their father and mother. If they declared that their possessions or savings were a ‘gift to God’, then these funds would be unavailable to help their parents. There was a tradition that goods could be set aside, either as a dedication to the Temple or in reserve for the performance of a vow. These ‘set aside’ funds were designated ‘*Corban*’ (Mark 7 v 11 to 13) and therefore exempt from other uses. The Pharisees used this tradition as a ruse to avoid providing for their parents’ needs.

What defiles a person (Matthew 15 v 10 to 20)

- What, according to Jesus, is the source of all that spoils human beings (v 19)? How would you apply Jesus’ teaching in these verses to people today? Do you think this explains why the world is in such a mess? Jesus has identified the problem – so what is the remedy?

It is said that the “heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart”. Indeed nothing is more deceitful than the heart (see Jeremiah 17 v 9). But remember, God never cures an old heart – instead he gives us a new one! See Ezekiel 36 v 26, and the related ideas in John 3 v 7 and 2 Corinthians 5 v 17.

The faith of a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15 v 21 to 28)

- Why do you think Jesus ignores the Canaanite woman at first (v 23, 24)? Jesus responds to her request with a parable about children, bread and dogs. What is he actually saying? What evidence is there that the woman understood Jesus’ point? What can we learn from this Gentile mother?

The Greek word for ‘the dogs’ here is *τα κυνάρια (ta kunaria)*, which means ‘little pet dogs’, rather than the usual derogatory term for Gentiles. The use of this word suggests that Jesus is treating the woman with great gentleness.

Jesus heals many (Matthew 15 v 29 to 31)

- What made the crowd ‘wonder’ and glorify God? Were they perhaps thinking of Isaiah 35 v 5 and 6?

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Jesus feeds the four thousand (Matthew 15 v 32 to 39)

- Why do you think the disciples, having recently witnessed the feeding of the 5,000, have such a hard time believing that Jesus can supply the needs of 4,000 here?

We can compare this story with the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew 14 v 15 to 21:

- (a) 5,000 men + women and children: took place in Bethsaida of Galilee, mainly to Jews; crowds with Jesus for one day; five loaves and two fish; 12 (small) baskets left over (12 is a Jewish number); spring time, near the Jewish feast of Passover (celebrating the birth of the nation Israel).
- (b) 4,000 men + women and children: took place in Decapolis, mainly to Gentiles; crowds with Jesus for three days; seven loaves and a few fish; 7 (large) baskets left over (7 is more representative of the Church); summer time, near the feast of *Shavuot* or Pentecost (celebrating the birth of the Church).