

Matthew 15:1-28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 15 verses 1 to 28 Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?

For they do not wash their hands when they eat. He answered them, And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, Honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.

But you say, If anyone tells his father or his mother, what you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honour his father. So for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God.

You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said, This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

And he called the people to him and said to them, Hear and understand. It is not what goes into the mouth, that defiles a person. But what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a person.

[1 : 06] Then the disciples came and said to him, Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying? He answered, Every plant that my father has not planted will be rooted up.

Let them alone. They are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit. But Peter said to him, Explain the parable to us.

And he said, Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.

For out of the mouth come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone. And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And 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.

[2 : 13] But 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. He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

But she came and knelt before him, saying, Lord, help me. And he answered, It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. She said, Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

Then Jesus answered her, O woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire. And her daughter was healed instantly. Matthew 15, verses 1 to 20, is an objection story with three scenes. Jesus engages first with the Pharisees and the scribes in verses 1 to 9, then with the people more generally in verses 10 to 11, and then finally with the disciples in verses 13 to 20. Jesus accuses the Pharisees and scribes when they ask him about his disciples not washing their hands.

He accuses them of undermining the commandment of God through their tradition. There's an ongoing theme in the Gospel of Matthew of law-keeping and breaking. Jesus seeks to fulfill the law. [3 : 26] And this is not just a focus upon every nitty-gritty detail of the law in just the letter. It's about fulfilling the deep intent of the law. As we've seen just earlier in his teaching on the Sabbath, Jesus is concerned to fulfill the purpose of rest, not just to obey some commandment that's narrowly focused upon external observance.

Jesus contrasts fulfilling with making void. The Pharisees make void the law. They act in a way that undermines the deep intent of the law.

Rather than actually serving to honor parents, they seek to find some way to circumvent God's purpose in the commandment. They are not fulfilling the spirit. They're using the letter and a perverse distortion of the letter to undermine the spirit.

This whole section is bookended with statements about cleansing hands when eating. Jesus is dealing with the objection, but within a far more fundamental challenge to the Pharisees and the scribes and their form of religion.

Tradition is to be judged, as Jesus teaches here, by scripture. And the problem for the Pharisees is primarily their hypocrisy, the way that they are focusing upon external observances that hide the impurity of the heart.

[4 : 43] And the purity of the heart is absolutely integral for Christ. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. The point of this passage is not primarily an argument against food laws, but rather against the Pharisaic use of the tradition.

Even the Levitical law highlighted that what came out was the real problem. Things were impure because they emerged from flesh, not because they came in and defiled persons who were already pure.

Once again, Jesus is challenged here concerning the behavior of his disciples, as he was at the beginning of chapter 12 concerning their Sabbath practice. And Jesus answers a question with a question.

This is a rhetorical practice that Jesus employs on a number of different occasions. It's a way of throwing the challenge back to the people who have thrown it at him.

And here Jesus is emphasizing that the Pharisees and scribes have no basis upon which to make this claim to him. They have no authority from which to make it. Jesus underlines the importance of the commandment to honor parents with the citation of Exodus chapter 21 verse 17, in addition to the citation of the fifth commandment, that those who dishonor father and mother should be put to death.

[6 : 08] This is the severest penalty. And yet they're undermining the spirit of that law entirely, trying to find some escape clause, some way to avoid it. And the use of the Corbyn vow to defraud one's neighbor, in this case parents, from what is due to them, is something that cuts loose love for God from love to neighbor, which should be its necessary corollary.

Jesus quotes Isaiah chapter 29 verse 14, and maybe we should pay attention to the context of that verse here. 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, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.

As usual, when we're reading quotes from the Old Testament and the New, we need to consider what comes around the quote that's used, not just the quote itself. And here I think that wider context can maybe be seen as part of the condemnation of them, that Jesus is going to perform all these wonders, all these signs, and rather than actually responding to them, there will be forms of judgment upon them.

Jesus does not directly answer the Pharisee's question at this point. He simply levels a counter-accusation. He fundamentally challenges the grounds on which they are making the accusation.

They are falsely claiming authority as arbiters of proper adherence to God's law, while violating it themselves. Jesus teaches again here that what comes out of the mouth is what really matters.

[7 : 48] The importance of the tongue is that it can manifest the heart. Now this is speech, but he also includes other things. But the tongue is symbolic of the place where things emerge from the heart the most.

We should probably beware of seeing this simply as a light dismissal of the food laws, rather than a disclosure of their true rationale. The point here, I don't think, is that Jesus wants to just abrogate the old food laws.

You have that sense in Mark to some degree, but I think there's more going on. Rather, the concern is to understand what they're really about. What really makes the logic of the food laws work?

Is it about avoiding external impurity? Or is it about symbolizing something more about the pursuit of internal purity? Jesus is fond of highlighting the radical antitheses that one encounters, for instance, in the prophets, pitting the external practice over against its internal rationale and purpose.

So, mercy versus sacrifice. The point of such an opposition is not that sacrifice shouldn't be made, or should be negated or abrogated. The tradition isn't being rejected wholesale.

[9 : 00] Rather, Jesus is showing the proper integrity of heart and act that should exist. He speaks about these people as those who are not the planting of God, that will be uprooted.

You can maybe consider this in light of the parable of the wheat and the tares, just a few chapters earlier. He presents implicitly the Pharisees as tares here. And as religious authorities, they're supposed to be guides to the blind, but they are actually like blind leading the blind.

Peter speaks for the disciples, asking for explanation of Jesus' challenge to the authority of the Pharisees. And Jesus then addresses the original point of the confrontation and the challenge.

There's a loose relationship of Jesus' list of defiling things that arise from the heart with the sixth to the tenth commandments, the commandments from murder to covetousness.

And there's an emphasis then upon the internal posture that's ultimately foundational to all true law observance. We've seen in Jesus' teaching and many points that he's about the fulfilment of the law and the serving of its true intent.

[10 : 09] Not to the doing away with the ritual and external observances, but to the fulfilment of the true intent that will make those ritual external observances have their proper place and purpose.

Jesus ends with a reference back to the challenge that was given first in verse 2, which has the effect of tying the whole section together. It also provides some sort of rationale that's more explicit within the book of Mark for Gentile inclusion.

Even though they may not be observing these symbolic commandments, they are observing the true reality of the heart. The incident that follows with the Canaanite woman approaching Jesus to heal her child is one that has caused many problems for people who have felt that the character of Jesus as displayed in this incident is uncaring and unloving.

I don't think that's actually the case. I think that a careful reading of this particular incident will help us to see what's truly going on. There are four requests made to Jesus.

First of all by the woman, then by the disciples who have been troubled and pestered by the woman, then by the woman again, and then by the woman again. She's rebuffed the first time with silence.

[11 : 21] Then there's a statement made to the disciples about the lost sheep of the house of Israel and the fact that Christ is sent only to them. Then there's the statement about the children's food. And this isn't the first time or the last when Jesus presents obstacles to someone so that they can prove their faith.

Note that Jesus doesn't send her away as the disciples request. What he does is present an obstacle instead. He declares that he's been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

And that's not something that is just dismissive. It's not just something that is untrue either. He has been sent to them in particular. And there is a sense in which this obstacle is a real obstacle.

It's not just one that's made up for the sake of things. In chapter 10 verses 5 to 6, Jesus says, Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

This is the particular remit of his calling. This is who he's focusing upon. And he speaks in the harshest terms, it might seem, of not giving children's bread to the dogs.

[12 : 29] Now it's quite possible Jesus is quoting a proverb here. And that this particular statement should not be seen as Christ's own words, but him repeating some statement that might have been current at the time.

And the woman counters in terms of the proverb itself, not treating the proverb as a final rebuff, but using it as leverage to gain Christ's action.

Some have suggested that we should see behind this incident and the interaction that precedes it, some relation to the Gentile mission that comes later on in the book of Acts.

Perhaps that's the case. The gospel will go to those outside of the house of Israel. Perhaps the most instructive parallel for understanding this incident, however, is found in Matthew chapter 8, where Jesus is approached by the centurion who wants to have his servant healed.

Once again, it's a Gentile requesting for the healing of someone else. And Jesus, in both cases, gives a discouraging response. When he responds to the centurion, he says, Shall I come and heal him?

[13 : 38] The point being, do you expect me to come and heal him? And the centurion responds, Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed.

Once again, there's a discouraging response given and a persistent answer to that response from Christ that demonstrates, in both cases, great faith.

In both of these stories, the Gentile then goes on to make a statement that is profoundly illuminating. For the centurion, it's a statement about authority and the power of Christ's word. And for the Canaanite woman, it's a different sort of statement. It's a statement about the extent of God's gifts and that they can overflow beyond their initial intended recipients.

And Jesus, in response to the faith of the centurion, says that he has not found anyone in Israel with such faith. And then later on, when he's talking to the Canaanite woman, he makes a similar sort of statement.

[14 : 38] O woman, great is your faith. These people are set forth, not just as people that Christ grudgingly lets go through, but rather as people that Christ presents obstacles to, but whose faith perseveres and persists and receives a reward.

Jesus presents these then not just as exceptional cases, but as examples that are held forth of faith for everyone. When we read the story of the Canaanite woman, this is a story that provides an example for us to follow.

Not just someone who slipped through and managed to get something that wasn't intended for her, but rather someone who demonstrates the claim that faith has upon God's good gifts and the way in which a persevering faith can receive from God's hand things that might seem initially to be denied.

A question to consider. In the Gospel of Mark, the woman is described as a Syrophenician, whereas here she's described as a Canaanite.

What connotations and significance might there be in describing her as a Canaanite woman? Why do you think that Matthew uses this particular term?

[15 : 52] Why do you think that