

Matthew's Gospel, chapter 15

Faith is key

Introduction

Welcome to this Truth for Today talk on Matthew chapter 15, "Faith is key." Scriptures quoted will be from the English Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

The chapter can be divided into four major sections plus a conclusion, "Lessons to learn."

1. The Pharisees and scribes have problems.
2. What defiles a person?
3. The great faith of the Canaanite mother.
4. The activity of the Lord Jesus.
5. Lessons to learn from chapter 15.

1.The Pharisees and scribes have problems, vv.1-9

Let us read these verses.

"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, 'Honour 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.'"

As we read from chapter 14 into chapter 15, it would appear that the Pharisees and scribes interrupted the Lord Jesus in His activity of healing people. Also, they must have observed the disciples eating without first washing their hands. Therefore, they questioned the Lord Jesus on this because it broke one of their traditions. These two groups were very keen to uphold their own man-made traditions handed down to them from previous generations. Now the Lord did not initially answer their concern. He did however challenge them on another tradition which broke the commandments of God. It was very clear from Exodus chapter 20 verse 12 which states "Honour your father and your mother" and from Exodus chapter 21 verse 17, "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death." Yet the Pharisees and scribes had brought in a tradition to circumvent the Scriptures by saying any help that parents might have had from their children could be dedicated to God so making the Word of God void, and therefore did not apply to them. The Apostle Paul refers to honouring parents in Ephesians 6 vv.1,2.

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honour your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise)” (Ephesians 6:1-2)

So it was not a purely an Old Testament teaching.

This brings in a very practical lesson for Christians today to support their parents, especially in their old age. Now not all parents will need supporting in situations where they have sufficient in terms of pension and savings, but not everyone may be so fortunate in today’s world. We could expand this care to include other elderly believers as Paul states when writing to Timothy in his first Epistle chapter 5.

“But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted and has devoted herself to every good work” (1 Timothy 5 vv. 8-10).

The Lord rounds off this section in verses 7-9 by saying that the Pharisees and scribes were hypocrites and then quotes from Isaiah 29 v.13, showing that their attitude was no different to their forefathers.

“And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men”” (Isaiah 29:13).

Let us remind ourselves that washing hands is a good thing, but it is not to be made into a religious ceremony. During the Covid pandemic one of the ways to protect ourselves from that nasty virus was to wash our hands along with other precautions. In these first nine verses we learn the importance of reading God’s Word, so we are always familiar with what is true.

The other important point to notice here is the circumventing of God’s Word, may be for our own gain, or that we just do not want to be challenged by the truth of Scripture. For example, the truth is that access to heaven is solely based on knowing the Lord Jesus Christ as a personal Saviour. It is not something automatically achieved at death or at a funeral service, despite the frequent use of the phrase, “He or she will be looking down from up there.” In this context, hell is too awful for unbelievers to contemplate so it is conveniently ignored and therefore to them heaven is the only possibility. However, there are no pearly gates at which to knock for admittance.

2.What defiles a person? vv.10-20

Let us read these verses.

“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.” 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 heavenly 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 heart 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” (Matthew 15:10-20).

In these verses the Lord turns our attention to what really defiles people. It is not what we eat but what proceeds out of the heart of a person. We find however that the disciples were focused upon the fact that the Pharisees had been offended by what the Lord had said. So, the Lord deals with their concerns in this matter and uses the illustration of plants. If they are not planted by God the Father, they will be rooted up. This is a reminder of the parable of the tares, which were sown among the good seed. The tares would remain growing until harvest time and then separated from the good plants to be burnt in the fire. The Lord now seeks to draw the disciples away from the Pharisees by saying if the blind lead the blind then both will fall into a pit. The Lord instructs His disciples to leave them alone, they will be dealt with at the appropriate time.

Peter, however, wants clarification as he has not understood what the Lord has been saying. Therefore, in very plain language the Lord states that what you eat passes into the stomach and eventually the waste is expelled as part of normal bodily function. Defilement is that which comes from the heart, for the heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked, Jeremiah 17:9.

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 KJV/AV).

And even more so that the Lord searches hearts to know what the motives are.

“I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds” (Jeremiah 17:10).

It is this that defiles a person.

“For out of the heart 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” (vv.19-20).

For the issue of salvation and how our hearts can be cleansed are simply stated in a children’s hymn.

What can wash away my stain?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Oh, precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

(R Lowry 1826-99)

As stated earlier the washing of hands is a good thing, especially before meals, but it is not a Christian religious necessity. We have probably all visited an ice cream vendor, or a fast-food retailer, but have not first run off to wash our hands.

3. The great faith of the Canaanite mother, vv.21-28

Let us read these verses.

“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.” 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 masters’ 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 15:21-28).

In these few verses we find a contrast to what has gone before. The Lord moves to a different and non-Jewish district – the Gentile area of Tyre and Sidon, where the Pharisees and scribes would not follow. However, this provides an opportunity for a Canaanite mother to plead for her daughter. There are similarities to John 4 and the woman of Samaria. As Jesus knew all things, this woman and her request did not surprise Him. What we do see is the persistence of the mother, and we also learn the reason why, her daughter was demon possessed.

The mother asks for mercy and addresses Jesus as “Lord, Son of David”. In this, the Canaanite mother might be using terminology not consistent with being a Gentile. But she has perceived something about the Lord Jesus which the Pharisees and scribes had not, or would not, acknowledge. Initially the Lord Jesus does not respond, and we might wonder why? Was the Lord not caring for a mother in distress? It would appear when the Lord made no reply that the woman turns her attention to the disciples, and this unsettles them. They did not know how to respond to her persistent cries for help. So, they ask the Lord to send her away, for surely that will solve the problem? We have two tests here, first the woman’s faith is being tested; and second, the disciples are tested as to their compassion. They just wanted to be rid of what they perceived as a problem. Someone seeking a blessing from the Lord Jesus is not a problem to Him but an opportunity.

Now the Lord Jesus speaks to the woman about His mission, that He was sent to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This does not deter the woman as her daughter’s life was at stake. The woman comes and kneels before the Lord Jesus and expresses in a few words her heart felt need, “Lord, help me.” We might have thought that this cry would have been sufficient to cause the Lord to act in kindness. However, the Lord has one more test for this desperate mother. Jesus responds, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the [little] dogs.” Immediately the woman responds, “Yes, Lord, yet even the [little] dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” What was the response now from the Lord Jesus? “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” The Lord Jesus had led this woman along to test the depth and reality of her faith. The closing words of this section simply state, “And her daughter was healed instantly.”

No doubt this was a lesson the disciples would later remember that the blessing the Lord Jesus gives, goes beyond the boundary of Israel. Peter came to realise this on the roof top of the house of Simon the Tanner, when a large sheet was lowered containing all kinds of animals and the voice from heaven told him to rise and eat. Philip the Evangelist had no problem as he travelled to Samaria and preached the Gospel there. Finally, Saul of Tarsus was specifically commissioned to go to the Gentiles with the Gospel. There is a lesson for us today to be persistent in our faith and

prayer, when petitioning the Lord with a very valid request. These are the “Lord, help me” situations.

4. The activity of the Lord Jesus, vv.29-39

Let us read these verses.

“Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel. Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.” And the disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?” And Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan” (Matthew 15:29-39).

Leaving the district of Tyre and Sidon, the Lord Jesus returned to the Sea of Galilee and made His way up a mountain and sat down. From this vantage point the Lord was able to meet the people who came crowding around Him. The crowd did not simply come to hear what the Lord Jesus would say, they brought lots of sick folk such as the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others. They brought them to the very feet of Jesus, and we are simply told that He healed them all. No one was ignored, no one missed out on being healed, all received a blessing. These were the lost sheep of the house of Israel. There was no testing of their faith as with the Canaanite woman. Jesus was demonstrating by signs that He was Israel’s Messiah. This caused the crowds to wonder when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. It brought forth praise as the crowd glorified the God of Israel. Sadly they missed seeing that their Messiah was before them. [John the Baptist had a problem with what was happening as we have recorded earlier in Matthew chapter 11. Let us read a few verses from there.](#)

“Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me”” (Matthew 11:2-6).

[So John the Baptist was encouraged that Jesus was indeed ‘The coming One’, but not in the way that the Jew had expected. A suffering Saviour must come first before their reigning Saviour comes. No doubt this was a comfort to John before he was cruelly martyred, when Herod cut off his head to satisfy the whim of a dancing girl!](#)

Towards the end of this Gospel, as with the other Gospels, the whole nation turned their backs on the Saviour and desired a murderer instead. Jesus became the suffering Saviour by going to the cross.

Of all the gifts Thy love bestows,
Thou giver of all good,
Not heaven itself a richer knows
Than the Redeemer's blood.

We praise Thee, and would praise Thee more;
To Thee our all we owe;
The precious Saviour, and the power
That makes Him precious too.

(W Cowper 1731-1800)

The last few verses, from verse 32 to the end of chapter 15, are concerned with what is known as 'The feeding of the 4000.' We now learn that the crowd was there on the mountain for three days and the Lord recognised that they needed feeding. He brought the issue to the disciples and explained that He had compassion on the crowd because they had nothing to eat. The Lord did not want to send them away hungry as the lack of food may result in them fainting on the way home. The disciples were quick to respond. "Where can we get enough food for this great crowd?" As so often happens when problems arise, we are quick to see the negative side rather than look for the positive or opportunity. The Lord asked, "What do you have?" Their response was, "Seven loaves and a few small fish." This should have reminded them of the time when the Lord used five loaves and two fish to feed 5000. But Matthew does not record any recognition on the part of the disciples that if the Lord had worked a miraculous feeding once before then He could do it again.

So the Lord once again took charge and organised the seating arrangements. Then taking the only provision that they had, He gave thanks for the food and used the disciples to distribute to the people. Everyone ate and were filled and there was some food left over, enough to fill seven baskets. What had started out as seven loaves to feed the multitude had an amazing return of seven baskets of food left over. 4000 men plus women and children were fed that day. When all were sufficiently fed, then it was the right time to send the crowd away to their homes. After that Jesus and His disciples took a boat and crossed over to the region of Magadan, where the Lord Jesus would face the Pharisees and Sadducees. But that is for the Truth for Today talk next week as we have now completed our consideration of chapter 15.

5. Lessons to learn from chapter 15

1. Unwashed hands is not the real problem. The real problem is circumventing the Word of God for our own gain.
2. Defiling thoughts, words, and actions, have their origin in the heart of man.
3. Those who are blind to God's word will only lead their followers into disaster.
4. Persistent prayer is required when seeking a blessing from the Lord.
5. While here in this world, Jesus was greater than any illness. Testimony that He was the promised Messiah.
6. Feeding the 4000 showed both His power as the Creator and His compassion for those in need.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Matthew's Gospel chapter 15, Faith is key, talk number T1317.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.