

Teachings of Jesus

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

Keith Chuvala, Keith@BackToTheBibleCatechism.com

Jesus' Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (Part V)

15:1-9, Jesus Opposes Empty Religious Tradition

Scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus: Up to this point, most of Jesus' ministry had been in the region of Galilee. Galilee was north of Judea, where Jerusalem is. Apparently, this particular group of scribes and Pharisees had been sent as an official delegation of sorts from Jerusalem to investigate Jesus and His teachings.

Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? The delegation is at least honest here; these ceremonial hand washings were commanded by Rabbinical tradition, not by Scripture. Many Jews took this "tradition of the elders" very seriously. Commentator Adam Clarke cites this quote from The Jerusalem Talmud (ca. 300 A.D.):

"In what estimation these are held by the Jews, the following examples will prove: 'The words of the scribes are lovely beyond the words of the law: for the words of the law are weighty and light, but the words of the scribes are all weighty.' Hierus. Berac. fol. 3."

And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? When His disciples are accused of a rather trivial "sin" against tradition, Jesus answers with an accusation of his own, one that is far more serious, one from the Scriptures.

But you say...: Some Jewish people of Jesus' day had a way to get around the command to honor your father and mother. If they declared that all their possessions or savings were a gift to God that were especially dedicated to Him, they could then say that their resources were unavailable to help their parents.

Through this man-made loophole one could completely disobey the command to honor his father or mother, and do it while appearing to be “religious.”

Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men: This quotation from Isaiah accurately described the real problem with these religious leaders. They elevated man’s tradition to an equal level with God’s revealed Word.

Note Jesus never says “All traditions are bad”. Nor does He ever say, “All traditions are good”! He compared traditions to the Word of God, and put them at a much lower priority than what God has said. Our traditions are subservient to the Word of God. They can be very useful in instructing us and reminding us about who God is and who we are as His children.

The LCMS, though generally and correctly thought of as a very *traditional* church, holds that tradition per -- even the best of church tradition -- is not authoritative for establishing or preserving the doctrine of Christian faith.

There are churches that believe that tradition *is* authoritative, which is helpful in understanding why they teach and believe some of the things they do.

15:10-20, Garbage Out, Garbage Inside!

...It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person: Jesus gets to the fundamental flaw of focusing solely on adherence to ceremonial laws and traditions without regard for what truly matters.

He is not saying there that there are not any defiling things that we can take into ourselves (e.g., crude forms of entertainment, pornography, etc.) But here Jesus speaks about ceremonial cleanliness in regard to food, likely anticipating that under the New Covenant all food would be declared kosher (Acts 10:15).

Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?

This is kind of amusing to me. The disciples are basically asking “Jesus, do you realize that you just offended those guys?!” Of *course* Jesus knew that He offended them! He intended to offend them for the way they valued tradition – more highly than the spirit of God’s law.

Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted: Commandments, edicts, and traditions of man will not last, because they do not come from God Himself.

This statement by Jesus should prompt us to examine ourselves; are we guilty of playing the Rabbi or Pharisee? Do we place our traditions on the same level as God's commandments?

Take some time to consider? What "traditions" have we established at Gloria Dei? Is each beneficial to all? Is each Biblically supported? Does each point us to Christ? Does each serve to teach, to unite, or to encourage?

Let them alone: This is interesting. Jesus did not organize a focused "Anti-Scribe and Pharisee" movement. He knew that their efforts would fail under the weight of its own legalism, and advises simply ignoring them.

They are blind leaders of the blind...both will fall into a ditch: I wonder if Jesus said this with sadness, and perhaps with even more sadness for those who are led by such blind men.

Explain this parable to us: Jesus didn't really speak in a parable here except for the brief illustration of the blind leading the blind. Yet because the disciples did not understand Him, they asked for an explanation.

Jesus amplified the point first made in verse 11. We are defiled from the inside out rather than from the outside in, and this is *particularly* true of ceremonial matters like foods. **What are ceremonial matters in our modern church's life?**

15:21-28, The Faith of a Canaanite Woman

To the region of Tyre and Sidon: Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities, located about 50 miles away. Jesus went all this way to meet this one Gentile woman's need. This shows remarkable and unexpected love from Jesus to this woman of Canaan.

It was unusual for Jesus to go Tyre and Sidon. According to Barclay, "At that time, or not much later, Josephus could write: 'Of the Phoenicians, the Tyrians have the most ill-feeling towards us.'"

Have mercy on me...My daughter is severely demon-possessed: This woman came to intercede for her daughter, and she provides for us an example of an effective intercessor – she prays directly out of her tremendous need. When she came to Jesus, she made her daughter’s needs her own.

Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! Wow. This *gentile* woman understood who Jesus was. Many of Jesus’ own countrymen didn’t know who He was (the promised Son of David), but this woman from Canaan knew. Perhaps this woman knew that Jesus had healed Gentiles before (Matthew 4:24-25; 8:5-13). One thing that made this encounter unique is that when Jesus did those previous miracles, Gentiles went to see Him in Jewish territory. This time, Jesus travelled to Gentile territory.

But He answered her not a word: Spurgeon notes:

“As Augustine says, ‘The Word spoke not a word,’ and that was so unlike him. He who was always so ready with responses to the cry of grief had no response for her.”

Send her away, for she cries out after us: Perhaps the disciples meant, “Send her away by giving her what she wants.” It is entirely possible that they just wanted her to go away, and the easiest way was for Jesus to fix her problem.

I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel: Jesus defined the focus of His mission to His irritated disciples and to the Gentile woman.

It is fair to ask whether Jesus meant the lost sheep *among* the house of Israel, or meant to say that Israel *as a whole* were lost sheep. Jesus’ instructions to His disciples in Matthew 10:6 (“go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”) would seem to imply the latter.

Then she came and knelt before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” She responded to the rebuff from Jesus with... *worship*. With increased dedication to offering up her request in faith. This Gentile woman shows us what a dedicated intercessor does.

It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs: Jesus continued to say discouraging things to the woman, yet this was not quite as severe as it might first sound. The word Jesus uses here is actually “little

dog”, which is a softening of the harshness of calling her a dog. I think we are at a disadvantage here by not being able to hear the tone of Jesus’ voice as He spoke to this woman. I suspect that His tone was not harsh; it may be been winsome, with the effect of inviting greater faith from the woman. That is merely pious speculation on my part. But then, there is her response...

Yes, Lord, yet even the (little) dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table: The woman responds with great faith. She admits her low estate, and does not debate the issue when Jesus called her one of the little dogs. She did not demand to be seen as a child; but only to be blessed as a dog. It was as if she said, “Jesus, I understand that the focus of Your ministry is to the Jews, and that they have a special place in God’s plan. Yet I also understand that Your ministry extends beyond the Jewish people, and I want to be part of that extended blessing.”

Her response is especially meaningful in light of the increasing rejection of Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders. It was as if the woman said, “I’m not asking for the portion that belongs to the children, just the crumbs that they don’t want.” In the flow of Matthew’s gospel, there was more and more that the Jewish religious establishment did not want to receive.

Hidden in this verse are two mighty, faith-filled words: “Yet even.” She accepted Jesus’ description and asked for mercy despite it – or perhaps because of it. Remember how Jacob would not let go of God until he got His blessing (and a permanent limp!)? Similarly, this woman is expressing an unwillingness to “let go” of Jesus until she receives mercy from Him.

O woman, great is your faith! Jesus never said this to any other person! He complimented the great faith of the Roman centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant (Matthew 8:10), but He said that to the crowd, not to the centurion directly. This Gentile woman heard it from Jesus directly.

So the only two people to receive this tremendous compliment from Jesus were Gentiles.

We read of nothing else that Jesus did during this time in Tyre and Sidon. It would seem that His only divine appointment was to meet the need of this woman of faith and her afflicted daughter.

15:29-39, The Feeding of the 4,000

This seems to be a unique period in the public ministry of Jesus, as it occurs in a predominately Gentile region of Galilee, on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee also known as the Decapolis (“ten cities”). There’s an interesting history of this area I invite you to read at https://www.land-of-the-bible.com/The_Decapolis. You’ll see that it’s a region in which there was considerable conflict between Jews and Greek military forces that culminated in a pig being sacrificed on an altar to Zeus in the Temple in Jerusalem in 167 B.C., which set off the Maccabean Revolt, the victory of which is still celebrated today during Hanukkah. So the people here were likely mixed or predominately Gentile.

...They put them at Jesus’ feet, and He healed them: Nothing is said here about the faith of those who were healed, or those who brought them, other than that they came to Jesus for help.

They glorified the God of Israel: But we do read of the result of Jesus’ work among these people. We may not know the state of their faith in Christ before He went there, but we know that, once again, the grace and mercy he delivered to those people in that place was precisely what was needed.

I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way: This miracle follows the same general pattern as the feeding of the 5,000, except that it reveals that the disciples may not have expected Jesus to use his Messianic power when the crowd was a Gentile one!

There are differences that distinguish this miracle from the feeding of the 5,000:

- The location
- The number of people being fed
- Availability of food in nearby towns
- Amount of leftovers (even a different word for “baskets”)
- The period of time people waited (3 days!)