
LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 15:1-39

To see Jesus, in a Rabbinic sense, rightly interpret the Law and minister to Gentiles.

The Heart of the Matter

I recently traveled to New York City with my wife for a quick three-day getaway without kids (we have three little girls). I, being a foodie, was really excited to try several different restaurants while I was there, and Jessica was more than anything excited to go to Broadway to see some shows. We were not disappointed.



One detail that struck me after the first day was how many places sold, “kosher foods.” New York City has a very high population of Orthodox Jews, and so the demand for kosher items is very high. There is even a neighborhood in the boroughs of Brooklyn known as, “Borough Park,” which is the home of one of the largest Orthodox Jewish communities outside of Israel. Being strict adherents to the Torah, kosher foods are not merely a healthy or conscionable food choice; they are necessary for the purity of faith.

In Matthew 15, Jesus is again confronted by the Pharisees regarding His disciples. “They do not wash their hands when they eat bread” (Matt. 15:2). Jesus doesn’t even respond to their question, but instead goes on the offensive against them, and then turns to the crowds to make sure they understood His point as well. When Peter asks Him about it, Jesus makes a remarkable statement in verses 17 and 18 regarding purity found in eating kosher foods: “Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those

defile the man.” His emphasis is not on the outward condition, but the inward one. Inward purity always takes precedent over outer purity. As a friend of mine often says, “The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart.”

Breaking the Law

In this chapter, there are a few pretty major interpretative challenges to the standards of Jesus’ time.

HAND WASHING

The issue that the Pharisees have with Jesus’ disciples is that they do not observe the tradition of the elders in that they do not wash their hands before eating bread. This tradition is not one with Biblical warrant. It was not uncommon for the Pharisees to stretch God’s law beyond its intended scope, and this was no exception. They were likely pulling from Exodus 30:17-21, in which the Israelites were to fashion a bronze basin and put water in it and place it in between the tent of meeting and the altar. The purpose of it was for Aaron and his sons (i.e. the priests) to wash before they ministered by offering smoke through a fire offering. The practice was critical, as the priests would die if they did not wash. However, this law was not meant to be stretched out over the common man before eating, and thus, it was a tradition that lacked real authority. While hand washing is a modern sanitary measure, it was not prescribed by God’s law, and therefore Jesus was not interested in lording it over His disciples.

FAMILY CARE

Instead of defending Himself, He goes on the offensive and attacks the Pharisees’ denial of their God-given responsibility to care for their parents. Apparently the Pharisees were justifying their inaction to care for their aging parents by saying that the money they could use to help them was already committed to the Lord as an act of worship. Mark describes the Pharisaic act with the Aramaic word, “Corban,” (Hebrew: קֶרְבָּן) which means, “temple gift,” from Leviticus 27:9. It was a strong argument that most people would not think of challenging. After all, how can you argue with giving your money to God? But this was not the true intent of their heart, and Jesus knew it, because He knew the hearts of men (Jn. 2:24-25). Jesus tells them that in rejecting to care for their family, they have broken an *actual* commandment of God, the fifth commandment. There is interpretative force on Jesus’ part here. The idea of caring for aging parents is not explicitly stated in the fifth commandment, but Jesus’s claim is that it is an application of it. Jesus is, in a Rabbinic fashion, interpreting the Law in a way that has not been understood for his contemporaries.

AN EXPANDED MENU

Jesus, after dealing with the external issues that were brought up by the Pharisees, addresses inward purity. He makes a controversial statement in verse 11: “It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.” He gives even further clarity to Peter in verses 17-20, noting that all foods enter and exit the body the same way, and none of them make one impure. It is, however, the things of the heart that condemn and defile a man. In the Markan version of this, Mark adds a note at the end of the narrative to confirm what the reader thinks is happening: “Thus, He declared all food clean” (Mark 7:19). The understanding of the food laws stems from the outward emphasis of purity demanded by the people of Israel in the Torah. However, Jesus takes upon the sin of those who believe in Him and as a result, believers fall under the umbrella of Jesus’ perfect righteousness. The need to pursue righteousness through outward disciplines diminishes in Christ, and instead, we are demanded to examine our hearts, the true motivator of faith.

THE ISAIAH CONNECTION

Rote obedience to religious laws without a heart oriented toward the Father is a useless endeavor, and Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 to make the point clear: “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away

from Me.” Just as the rebellious Israelites that were judged through exile, these opponents of Jesus do not have an intimate relationship with God. Such a strong rebuke caused His own disciple Peter to question Jesus and Jesus calls them, “blind guides of the blind” (Matt. 15:14), a toss to what He said in chapter 13: “Seeing, they do not see, and hearing, they do not hear” (Matt. 13:13). The issue here and in the two previous examples, per usual, is the heart. In chapter 5, He even included it in His Beatitudes when He said, “Blessed are the pure in heart” (Matt. 5:8). Jesus is always concerned with the purity of the heart, and this becomes pretty evident in the way He addresses the Law.

Canaanite Faith

After leaving Gennesaret, Jesus heads toward the district of Tyre and Sidon and is approached by a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites had a storied clash with the Israelites from the very beginning. Going all the way back to Genesis, we learn that Noah fathered a son named Ham whom the Canaanites descended from. Noah also had a son named Shem who fathered a son named Arphaxad, and after nine generations a man named Abraham was born. From Abraham eventually comes Israel (the man, Jacob), and eventually Joshua leads Israel (the people) into Canaan, the land that God had promised them. This led to conflict, war, and death on a large scale. The history of these two nations paints a picture between Jesus and this woman. She is not just a foreigner. She is a woman whose people have been opposed to Jesus’ people from the very (second) beginning (after the flood). Her cry to Him, however, is not what you would expect. She calls out to Him, “Lord! Son of David!” A title of respect followed by a Messianic title. Her dilemma was simple; her daughter was cruelly demon-possessed. Jesus’ response to her is not what you’d expect. He essentially tells her that He has not come for anyone other than Jews (“the house of Israel”). Then He says, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” It’s a rather harsh statement! In His analogy, the Jews are the children and the dogs are Gentiles (i.e. the Canaanite woman). And then, something happens that only happens once in the New Testament. Someone “bests” Jesus. She responds, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table” (Matt. 15:27). He marvels at her faith, a lowly Canaanite woman, and immediately the woman’s daughter is healed.

The Second Meal

Matthew 15 also records a second feeding of a multitude of people, with some minor differences. In the first feeding, the disciples warn that the people should go into town to buy food, but this time Jesus remarks that they should not because they might faint on the way there. This is also one of the only times the text actually explicitly tells us that Jesus had compassion on the people. In other instances He is moved by their disparity, but here it is made clear. Because of the similarities, this is often thought to be a doublet (a copy of the first), but this is unlikely. Because of Jesus’ geographical path and his previous encounter with the Canaanite woman, Matthew likely intends for us to understand that Jesus is in Gentile territory, giving to “the dogs” the true Bread of Life.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 15:1-10. Who is Jesus addressing and where did they come from? What is the issue they bring to Him? What is His response? What verse does He quote, and why? Does He address anyone else, and if so, who?
2. Read Matthew 15:12-14. How does Jesus describe the Pharisees? In your opinion, why does He call them that? How does this relate to Matthew 13 (Hint: See the notes)?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 15:15-20. In your own words, summarize this passage. What is significant about what Jesus is saying? Do you agree with His statement, and why?
2. Read Matthew 15:21-28. What does this woman ask of Jesus and how does He respond? How do you feel about Jesus' response? What does the woman say back? What does this demonstrate about her?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 15:29-31. Where does Jesus go and what does He do? Why does He do it, according to the text?
2. Read Matthew 15:32-39. What is your immediate thought when you read this passage? Read Matthew 14:13-21. Write the differences between these two events. In your opinion, why did Jesus do this again (Hint: See the notes)?

Day Four

1. What is the general picture being painted regarding Gentiles in the Matthew's Gospel so far?
2. When you compare the Jewish response and the Gentile response to Jesus, what are the similarities and what are the differences?

Week 19 Discussion: Sticks and Stones

In Matthew 15, Jesus pronounces some radically controversial interpretations of the Law. For Jesus, the issue of purity is not an outward issue but an inward one and so much of what He says focuses on the heart. In this particular passage, he connects the root problem of the heart to what proceeds forth from the mouth. For Jesus (meaning also, for us), our words matter because they reveal and project what is in the heart. Discuss as a group the implications of this.

1. Icebreaker: Prior to your faith in Christ, did you use bad language? Was it easy to quit using bad language when you were born again, or do you still struggle?
2. In your opinion, which is worse: cuss words or gossip? Why? Use Scripture if possible.
3. What are some feelings that trigger profanity?
4. Read Matthew 5:33-37. How does this connect to what Jesus is saying in this passage about what comes from the heart?
5. What is the most hurtful thing you have said to someone? What made it hurtful? What was the condition of your heart when you said it? Were you able to ask for forgiveness afterwards?
6. What is the most hurtful thing someone has said to you? How did it affect your heart? Were you able to make peace afterwards?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus interprets the Law in a radical way that addresses the inward condition, not the outward.
2. Sometimes the people who exhibit the greatest faith are the ones you least expect to do so.

PRAYER REQUESTS: