

February 7, 2010/Matthew 15:1-31 (ESV¹)

the official text this morning is verses 21-31 ... in order to put these in perspective it will be useful to contrast the attitude of the gentile woman to that of the Pharisees in the first part of the chapter ... so let us quickly look at the first 20 verses as well ...

Mat 15:1 Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,

Mat 15:2 "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."

the "tradition of the elders" refers to the oral, rabbinical elaboration on the OT law (given through Moses) ... the Pharisees are talking here about ceremonial washing that *they* had decided should be required of all serious Jews before eating, to make sure that they weren't accidentally going to eat with hands that had touched someone or something, who had touched someone or something, who had touched someone or something, etc. that was ceremonially unclean ... this elaboration on the written OT Law amounted to a rule-keeping system through which they were expecting to approve themselves before God ...

Jesus indicts them for their lack of understanding of what God truly requires of man ... He does this by (in good rabbinical fashion) answering a question with a question and pointing out that their system in fact contradicted the OT Law ...

Mat 15:3 He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"

Mat 15:4 For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'

Mat 15:5 But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God,"

Mat 15:6 he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.

Jesus points to the 5th commandment here ... you don't get any more basic in terms of laying out God's moral intentions for man than the 10 commandments! ... the game the Pharisees were allowing was for a person to take an oath dedicating his property "to God," which apparently allowed him to continue to use it, but prevented him from giving it to pay for the care of his parents ... the Pharisees were allowing their rules in this way to contradict the clear intention of the 5th commandment ... this is a "religion" of rules and manipulation of those rules according to one's own desires and for one's own advantage ... it is a far cry from a true love of God and His commands and a humble dependence upon Him ... Jesus quotes **Isaiah 29:13** ...

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Mat 15:7 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

Mat 15:8 "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;

Mat 15:9 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

the Pharisees claimed to be upholding the OT ... what they were really doing was upholding a systems of false religion that was exactly the kind of thing that God had condemned through the prophet Isaiah ... Jesus turns now to the crowd and elaborates on the folly of the Pharisees' attempted self-approval to God via the keeping of their own rules ...

Mat 15:10 And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand:

Mat 15:11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."

it is not the accidental touching of something or someone who has touched something or someone who has touched something or someone ritually unclean that renders us unacceptable to God ... the matter is far more serious than that ... it is the habits of our fallen hearts that undo us ...

Mat 15:12 Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?"

Mat 15:13 He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.

Mat 15:14 Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

the Pharisees, believing that they were the keepers of the written and oral Laws, held that they were the guides for the (spiritually) blind ... Jesus says that they themselves are blind, and what good is a blind guide? ... even the disciples had a hard time grasping this ... they were products of their culture ... they were not especially expert in the Scriptures nor in any position to question the authority of the scribes Pharisees ... those folks were, as far as they knew, the keepers and interpreters of the Law ... they were just common folks ... who were they to call they religious leaders into account? ...

Mat 15:15 But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us."

Mat 15:16 And he said, "Are you also still without understanding?"

Mat 15:17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled?

Mat 15:18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.

Mat 15:19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

Mat 15:20 These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."

so in the first 20 verses here we have a picture of adherents to a false religion who were willing to contradict the plain intentions of God for mankind in order to set up a system by which man could supposedly work his way to God ... a system that however failed to get at the real problem of the evil that is bound up in the human heart ...

Jesus now takes His disciples on an excursion (that many scholars believe lasted as long as six months) into gentile territory ... it seems as if Jesus is looking for an opportunity to teach them privately, away from the demands of the Jewish crowds and their expectations of what He might be as Messiah ... we should note that to the Jewish mind of the day, this was not particularly lightly done ... talk about setting oneself up to get ritually defiled!!! ... in gentile territory, there would be no way to avoid touching these people and their stuff ... hardly the way for a good Jewish Rabbi to be leading His little flock, unless there is something fundamentally different about this Rabbi, and the era His death and resurrection are going to usher in ... we need to bear this in mind as we hear these next few verses ... the kind of incident we see here is essentially guaranteed by the fact that Jesus has left Jewish territory ... Jesus is not caught off guard by it ... and His behavior in the incident is meant to begin to teach His disciples the lesson that comes totally clear in Acts 10 at the house of Cornelius ... the Kingdom is in fact open to all who are willing to wholly and gratefully cast themselves on the mercy of God ...

Mat 15:21 And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

Mat 15:22 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."

Tyre and Sidon ... one of the more notorious pagan regions surrounding Israel, one that Jesus had referred to in Matthew 11 as known to the Jews as especially corrupt ... here comes a woman of the region (out of love for her daughter and sheer desperation) approaching this itinerant Jewish Rabbi and His flock ... she has somehow heard that He has supernatural ability and comes begging for help ...

notice that she has an inkling that Jesus is Messiah ... Lord, Son of David ... notice also both the manner and object of her request ... the verb tense is the imperfect, indicating that this is a constantly repeated appeal ... again and again the appeal is for simple mercy ... there is no hint here that she feels she is owed anything ... she comes, not on the basis of any merit of her own, but in hope that Jesus will, because of who He is, choose to be merciful ... there is a tremendous

difference evident already between the attitude of this pagan gentile woman and the "religious" Pharisees ...

but Jesus initially does not respond ... we don't like that ... we want Him to immediately jump to the aid of this woman ... that reveals that our religion is essentially man-centered and impatient ... but this is the Son of God here, and He will, for His purposes, draw out this situation and through it teach all of us about the nature of God's plan for the redemption of mankind ...

Mat 15:23 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."

send her away ... the disciples want some peace and quiet ... they want relief from her incessant begging for help and there is even some hint here that they are asking the Jesus grant her request in order to shut her up ... think about how serious and persistent this woman had to be!!! ... she cares not that she's violating social norms approaching these Jews ... she is well aware of the contempt the average Jew has for her race ... but to her, the only thing that counts is obtaining mercy ...

Mat 15:24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

this again seems to us "moderns" to be hard, to be uncaring, and even (horror of horrors) ethnocentric/undemocratic! ... some liberal commentators have gone so far as to (in their own infinite wisdom) maintain that Jesus could never have said this and that it must be an addition of some scribe in a time where the church was under attack from the Jews ... that's garbage ... what Jesus says is the truth ... His earthly ministry was directed at the Jews ... the fact is that God's wonderful plan of redemption was worked through the Jews ... that plan eventually is seen to encompass all peoples, but it came through the Jews, they were the ones prepared for it, and that's where Jesus was spending His energy ... besides, this (true) reply serves to bring out in this woman what Jesus wants to see and what He wants the disciples to see ...

Mat 15:25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

the woman will not give up ... she won't go off and sulk, thinking that Jesus has insulted her ... she is instead seeing more and more clearly that it is He that is her only hope ... (contrast modern man ... you want to rile up a modern, tell him that he's not acceptable to God in his unrepentant state ... it will take far less to send him stomping off than this suggestion that the Gospel is first for the Jew ...)

Mat 15:26 And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

the Jews called gentiles "dogs" ... the word they used was one for a cur ... a wild street dog ... the word that Jesus uses here is not that one ... it is instead a diminutive ... but scholars caution to not get sentimental and think this form really lessened the severity of the comment ... He is probably quoting a common proverb that reflected the standard Jewish attitude of the time regarding how appropriate it would be for Him to grant her request ... Jesus doesn't endorse the attitude or say it

is right ... but He is drawing out of this woman what her heart is towards Him ... and again this would be a good time to go stomping off, if that's what one wanted to do ... but the woman does not ... instead, she humbly persists ...

Mat 15:27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

she says that she has no quibble with the plan of God ... she's not asking for the Jew's portion and freely admits she is coming without the proper endorsements ... but she recognizes that the richness of God's grace is such that there is plenty for the kids, with more than enough left over for the family dog ... she doesn't claim that she's owed anything, she simply depends/relies upon the mercy of Jesus ... in true faith, she has cast herself upon Him and is relying on and cleaving to Him ...

Mat 15:28 Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

it is this kind of desperate, persistent, humble reliance upon Christ that God looks for in us ... it's not the crass kind of game playing with homemade rule systems that the Pharisees were engaged in that pleases God ... instead it's the stuff exhibited by this woman ... and in a foreshadowing to the disciples that the kingdom will be open to Jew and Gentile alike with this kind of faith, Jesus dispenses mercy on her and her daughter ...

the gap between verses 28 and 29 is commonly thought to be as much as 6 months ... Jesus and the disciples are returning from gentile territory towards Israel by an inland route ...

Mat 15:29 Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there.

Mat 15:30 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,

Mat 15:31 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.

this is gentile territory and a gentile crowd ... the Gospel is indeed for all people, and His retreat with the disciples over, Jesus takes time to minister to these gentiles ... with the result that they praise the God of Israel ... the Messianic works prophesied by Isaiah have spilled over to the gentiles ...

Isa 35:5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

Isa 35:6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;