

**Matthew**

**Chapter 15**

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## MATTHEW CHAPTER 15

Jesus continues to clash with the religious rulers. After these confrontations He moves to Gentile country and heals the daughter of a Canaanite woman. In addition, He performs another miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish.

### JESUS AND THE TRADITIONS OF THE ELDERS (15:1-20)

Jesus now makes a frontal attack on the traditions and interpretations of the elders which were at variance with the truth of the word of God. He will respond to their charges by telling them they are actually disobeying God's commandments with their man-made traditions.

**Matt. 15:1** Then Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying,

**Note on a variant reading:** Many manuscripts read *the* before *Pharisees*.

**Then Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying,** This may have been a formal or semi-formal delegation.

**Matt. 15:2** “Why are your disciples transgressing the tradition of the elders? For they are not washing their hands before they eat bread.”

**Note on a variant reading:** Some manuscripts do not have the word *their*.

**Why are your disciples transgressing the tradition of the elders?** The tradition of the elders is a technical term for the oral tradition of the Pharisees was an interpretation of the Law.

**For they are not washing their hands before they eat bread.** There is no Old Testament commandment concerning the ceremonial washing of the hands before the eating of ordinary meals.

**Matt. 15:3** He answered and said to them, “Why are you yourselves transgressing the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?”

**He answered and said to them, “Why are you yourselves** The Greek is emphatic. It is they themselves that are doing this.

**transgressing the commandment of God** What they are doing is transgressing God's commandment.

**for the sake of your tradition?”** Rather than responding to them Jesus goes on the offensive and accuses them of disobeying God's commandment. *You* is emphatic.

**Matt. 15:4** For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother; and he who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.’

**Note on variant readings:** Some manuscripts read *God commanded* rather than *God said*. Some

manuscripts do not have *your* after mother and father.

**For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother;’** The fifth commandment. Notice Jesus indicates that God Himself said this.

**and he who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.’** This brings special emphasis on the supreme penalty.

**Matt. 15:5** But you yourselves are saying, “Whosoever says to his father or to his mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is now given to God,

**Note on a variant reading:** One manuscript (*Sinaiticus*) has *it is nothing* after *to his mother*.

**But you yourselves are saying,** In contrast to God, *you* are saying.

**“Whosoever says to his father or to his mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is now given to God,** In contrast to what God said, the Pharisees promoted a practice that violated the spirit and the letter of the fifth commandment. If one designated a formal vow of one’s material wealth as a gift or offering for support of the temple ritual, one was discharged from the responsibility to one’s parents—the money was no longer available to support the parents. This tradition violated the biblical commandment. The vow to give one’s wealth to the temple was regarded as sacred and could not be altered (cf. Deuteronomy 23:21-23; Numbers 30:3-5).

**Matt. 15:6** he is not to honor his father.’ Thus you have nullified the word of God through your tradition.

**Note on variant readings:** Some manuscripts have *and his mother* after *his father*. Some manuscripts have *the commandment of God* instead of *the word of God*. Other manuscripts have *the law of God* instead of *the word of God*.

**he is not to honor his father.’ Thus you have nullified the word of God through your tradition.** The parents’ right to expect a provision from their son was invalidated or nullified. They were robbed of their rightful privilege (cf. Proverbs 28:24). The clear commandment of the law was transgressed.

**Matt. 15:7** You hypocrites, rightly Isaiah has prophesied concerning you, saying,

**You hypocrites, rightly Isaiah has prophesied concerning you, saying,** Matthew adds an Old Testament citation (Isaiah 29:13) to seal the case against the Pharisees.

**Matt. 15:8** ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

**Note on a variant reading:** Instead of *This people* some manuscripts read *This people draws near to be with their mouth and*.

**‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.** At the bottom is the issue of hypocrisy, they were pretending to obey the will of God while in fact they were transgressing it.

**Matt. 15:9** And in vain they worship me, teaching as commandments the doctrines of men.’

**And in vain they worship me, teaching as commandments the doctrines of men.’** Human commandments have taken the place of the commandments of God (see also chapter 23; Colossians 2:22; Titus 1:14).

**Matt. 15:10** And after summoning the crowd, he said to them, “Listen and understand.

**And after summoning the crowd, he said to them, “Listen and understand.** Jesus calls the crowd together in order to make an important point.

**Matt. 15:11** It is not that which goes into the mouth that defiles the man, but that which proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.”

**Note variant readings:** One manuscripts has *everything* after *not*. Instead of *this (thing)* a few Latin manuscripts read *that (thing)*.

**It is not that which goes into the mouth that defiles the man.”** It is not the food we eat.

**but that which proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.** Defilement comes from within not without. The error of the Pharisees and their scribes as revealed here can only be seen as a tragic irony. Those who were supposedly the most deeply committed to the practice of the righteousness of the law invented a tradition that invalidated God’s commandment.

**Matt. 15:12** Then the disciples came to him saying, “You know that the Pharisees were offended after hearing your statement.”

**Note on a variant reading:** Many manuscripts read *His* after *disciples*.

**Then the disciples came to him saying, “You know that the Pharisees were offended after hearing your statement.”** The Pharisees were scandalized at Jesus’ statement. Did Jesus know that He had offended the Pharisees? If He did know did it matter to Him?

**Matt. 15:13** But he answered and said, “Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.

**But he answered and said, “Every plant which** The statement refers to the Pharisees themselves, not their tradition. In the parable of the Sower and the Weeds, the plants are people.

**my heavenly Father** This phrase is a favorite of Matthew. By using this term, Jesus shows the special relationship that He had with the Father. This unique relationship allowed Him to speak with absolute authority.

**has not planted** Jesus’ answer showed His strong rejection of the Pharisees.

**will be uprooted.** This phrase is symbolic of their destruction. The Pharisees had not been planted by God and thus God will pull them out of the ground. This uprooting will take place at the time of judgment.

**Matt. 15:14** Leave them alone; for they are blind guides of blind men. And if the blind lead the blind both will fall into the pit.”

**Note on a variant reading:** Some manuscripts do not have *of blind men*.

**Leave them alone,** This is probably Jesus response to their initial question.  
**for they are blind guides of blind men.** Their being offended should be no worry of the disciples because they are blind.

**And if the blind lead the blind** If blind men lead other blind men.

**both will fall into the pit.”** Jesus shows the absurdity of the situation.

**Matt. 15:15** Peter answered and said to him, “Explain this parable to us.”

**Note on a variant reading:** Some manuscripts do not have *this* before *parable*.

**Peter answered and said to him,** Peter acts as spokesman for the group.

**“Explain this parable to us.”** He wants to know what Jesus meant.

**Matt. 15:16** And he said, “Are you yourselves still without understanding?”

**Note on a variant reading:** Many manuscripts read *Jesus* instead of *He*.

**And he said, “Are you yourselves still without understanding?”** Jesus responds with a mild rebuke.

**Matt. 15:17** Do you not understand that everything that enters into the mouth goes into the stomach and then goes out in the sewer?

**Note on a variant reading:** Many manuscripts read *not yet* instead of *not*.

**Do you not understand** Obviously they did not

**that everything that enters into the mouth goes into the stomach**

**and then goes out in the sewer?** Food is of little consequence to the spiritual state of a person.

**Matt. 15:18** But the things that proceed out of the mouth come out from the heart, and these things defile the man.

**Note on a variant reading:** A few manuscripts (including Sinaiticus) do not have *and these things defile the man*.

**But the things that proceed out of the mouth come out from the heart,** The heart refers to the genuine feelings of a person, not merely what that person says. The mouth merely reflects what the heart

is thinking.

**and these things defile the man.** In contrast the words that one speaks is what defiles a person.

**Matt. 15:19** For out of the heart comes out evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies.

**Note on a variant reading:** A few manuscripts (including Sinaiticus) do not have *For out of the heart*.

**For out of the heart comes out evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies.** Jesus lists the type of things that come from the heart.

**Matt. 15:20** These are the things that defile the man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.

**These are the things that defile the man,** The thought of verse eighteen is repeated for emphasis.

**but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.** The real problem is in the heart.

#### **THE FAITH OF THE CANAANITE WOMAN (15:21-28)**

Jesus heals the daughter of a Gentile woman after she pleads with Him for the healing.

**Matt. 15:21** Then Jesus went out from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon.

**Then Jesus went out from there,** Jesus now moves to Gentile territory. He has withdrawn from Israel ideologically (verses 1-20) now he will withdraw geographically. This is not a case of Gentiles or outsiders coming to Him (4:24,25). He is now going to them.

**and withdrew** However, before He goes to the Gentiles He will withdraw for some temporary seclusion

**into the district of Tyre and Sidon.** Instead of crossing to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee he moves north to Tyre and Sidon (part of modern Lebanon and Syria).

Jesus has already mentioned Tyre and Sidon (11:22) in comparison to the non-repentant cities of where He had performed many of His mighty works. These cities will now have another chance to believe in Him.

Elijah, who ministered in this same territory during a period of unbelief of the Israelite people, also found great faith in a woman from this region (1 Kings 17).

**Matt. 15:22** And behold, a Canaanite woman came out from that region, and began crying out, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David. My daughter is badly demon-possessed."

**Note on variant readings:** Instead of *began crying out* some manuscripts read *cried out*. Other manuscripts read *shouted out* while a few others read *began shouting out*. After *crying out* many manuscripts read *to Him*. One manuscript reads *after Him*.

**And behold, a Canaanite woman came out from that region,** Marks calls her a “Greek” which almost certainly means that the conversation took place in Greek rather than in Aramaic.

**and began crying out, saying,** The Greek contains the idea that she continued to cry out or repeatedly cried out.

**“Have mercy on me,** This is the same appeal that the blind men made (9:27) who also appealed to Jesus as the Son of David.

**O Lord,** Lord can have a number of connotations. It can be a simple form of address or it can be an acknowledgment that Jesus is the Lord.

**Son of David.** The combination of Lord with Son of David shows a reverential address. She recognizes Jesus as the Son of David—the Jewish designation of the Messiah. Just how much she understood what the title meant is not stated. It may have only been some political title as far as she understood it. She is not the only person that Jesus helped who did not understand who He is (9:27; 12:23; 20:30ff.). However, as the Son of David, she would have no right to call upon Him seeing that this title is exclusively Jewish—unless she was one of those Gentiles who converted to Judaism. There is, however, no evidence that this was the case.

**My daughter is badly demon-possessed.”** Her request showed the depth of her distress. Several things should be noted:

1. Her own religion was unable to do anything to help her demon-possessed daughter. When it came time to find a solution to the problem, it was not in her religion but to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that she looked to. This woman’s suffering was great because of the love she felt for her daughter and there was nothing that her faith could do about it.
2. The presence of the demon in her daughter gives further evidence as to their actual existence. They seem to cross all boundaries of age, sex and national origin.
3. For whatever reason, she came alone to Jesus. The depth of her anguish was most likely easier to show apart from her daughter’s presence.
4. Furthermore, her request to Jesus was in spite of certain disadvantages she had. First, she was a woman. The Jews did not look kindly on a woman talking to a Rabbi. Also it was unusual for a Rabbi to be addressed by a woman (see John 4:7-9,27). But Jesus was not any Rabbi as she herself recognized, He was the Son of David, the Messiah.

Secondly, she was a Gentile coming to a Jew. Therefore she would be one of the “heathens” who the Jews looked down upon (Romans 1:13-16; 2:9ff.; 1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

Thirdly, not only was she a Gentile, but she was a Canaanite by ancestry and possibly also by religion. The Canaanites were worshippers of Baal as well as being an accursed race in which Israel was to be separate from (Genesis 9:25-27; 10:6; Exodus 23:23-33; 34:11-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-5, 16; 20:16-18). And

yet, even with these disadvantages of her position, the great need that she had caused her to approach Jesus with her request.

5. Mark tells us that she came to Jesus having heard about Him (Mark 7:27). Just how and where she heard about Him is unknown. Though Jesus withdrew to this area to gain some sort of privacy from the multitudes, still He is recognized.

**Matt. 15:23** But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came out and began to urge him saying, “Send her away, because she keeps shouting out after us.”

**But he did not answer her a word.** Though Jesus did not answer her, neither did He send her away.

**And his disciples came out and began to urge him saying, “Send her away, because she keeps shouting out after us.”** Jesus at first ignores the woman’s request but her continual crying out annoyed the disciples.

**Matt. 15:24** He answered and said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

**Note on a variant reading:** A few manuscripts read *these lost sheep*.

**He answered and said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** His surprising lack of response is now explained. This statement confirms the limits of His mission as in 10:5,6. However we will immediately see that this situation will be altered with the healing of the woman’s daughter as well as other events Matthew records (21:43; 24:14; 28:19).

Also, though Jesus said that others came first, He did not deny that she could come second (see Mark 7:27).

**Matt. 15:25** But she came out and began to bow down before him, saying, “Lord, help me!”

**Note on a variant reading:** Many manuscripts read *bowed down* instead of *began to bow down*.

**But she came out and began to bow down before him,** The word translated *bow down* can also be translated *worship*.

**saying, “Lord, help me!”** The woman continues after being rebuffed by Jesus. She is convinced that He is the Jewish Messiah and that He can heal her daughter.

**Matt. 15:26** Then he answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

**Note on a variant reading:** Instead of *it is not good* some manuscripts read *it is not lawful*.

**Then he answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”** The children refers to those of Israel who have the right to receive bread (ie. those who belong to the kingdom). *Dogs* refers to those outside the kingdom.



**Matt. 15:27** But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs are eating the scraps that fall from their masters’ table.”

**But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs are eating the scraps that fall from their masters’ table.”** The banquet is for Israel. The woman seems to realize this but acknowledges that the dogs still eat the crumbs that fall from the table.

**Matt. 15:28** Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to as you wish.” And her daughter was healed that very hour.

**Note on a variant reading:** A few manuscripts do not have the word *Jesus*.

**Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to as you wish.” And her daughter was healed that very hour.** We have another compliment to a Gentile (cf. 8:10 where a deliberate contrast to Israel is made). The address, “O woman” shows how much Jesus was moved by her faith. An immediate healing followed though the healing itself is not described.

#### THE FEEDING OF THE FOUR THOUSAND (15:29-39)

Jesus repeats the multiplication of the loaves and fish but this time among the Gentiles.

**Matt. 15:29** And departing from there, Jesus went along the Sea of Galilee, and went up into the mountain and sat down.

**And departing from there, Jesus went along the Sea of Galilee, and went up into the mountain and sat down.** Jesus now moves to the Sea of Galilee and again goes to a mountain.

**Matt. 15:30** And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the maimed, the mute, and many others, and they put them alongside his feet, and he healed them.

**Note on variant readings:** A few manuscripts read *the feet of Jesus* instead of *His feet*. After *healed them* a few manuscripts read *all*.

**And the great crowd came to him, having with them the lame, the blind, the maimed, the mute, and many others, and they put them alongside his feet, and he healed them.** As usual the crowds flock to Jesus and also as usual He healed them. Of the four categories of people mentioned only the “deformed” are not mentioned again in Matthew.

**Matt. 15:31** so that the crowd marveled as they saw the mute speak, the deformed made well, the lame ones walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.

**Note on variant readings:** Many manuscripts read *the crowds* (plural) instead of simply *the crowd*. Some manuscripts read *hearing after mute* while other manuscripts read *hearing and speaking*. Some manuscripts do not have *the deformed made well*. Instead of *they glorified* some manuscripts read *they began to glorify*.

**so that the crowd marveled as they saw the mute speak,** The word translated *mute* can also mean *deaf*.

**the deformed made well, the lame ones walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.** The four categories are restated again but this time in a different order. This may have been a Gentile crowd.

**Matt. 15:32** After summoning his disciples Jesus said, “I have compassion upon the crowd, because they have remained with me now three days, and have nothing to eat. And I do not wish to release them hungry, lest they might faint on the way.”

**Note on a variant reading:** Many manuscripts do not have *His* after *disciples*.

**After summoning his disciples Jesus said, “I have compassion upon the crowd, because they have remained with me now three days, and have nothing to eat.** A crowd had stayed with Jesus in the desert for three days.

**And I do not wish to release them hungry, lest they might faint on the way.”** In contrast to the previous occasion with a large crowd, He is the one who initiates the concern for the multitudes. The disciples do not seem to be as concerned about the Gentiles as they were about the Jewish crowds.

**Matt. 15:33** And the disciples said to him, “Where could we get enough loaves in this deserted place to feed such a crowd?”

**Note on a variant reading:** Instead of *the disciples* many manuscripts read *His disciples*.

**And the disciples said to him, “Where could we get enough loaves in this deserted place to feed such a crowd?”** How quickly they forget (see chapter 14).

**Matt. 15:34** Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven and a few small fish.”

**Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven and a few small fish.”** Jesus again asks what they have.

**Matt. 15:35** And he commanded the crowd to sit down upon the ground.

**And he commanded the crowd to sit down upon the ground.** Another feeding miracle is about to occur.

**Matt. 15:36** Then he took seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them, and proceeded to give it to the disciples, and his disciples, in turn, to the crowd.

**Note on variant readings:** Instead of *proceeded to give* many manuscripts read *gave*. Many manuscripts read *to His disciples* rather than *to the disciples*

**Then he took seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them, and proceeded to give it to the disciples, and his disciples, in turn, to the crowd.** The use of the imperfect tense in Greek (continuous action in past time) shows that Jesus was continually giving the loaves and fish to His disciples and they were passing it out to the crowd.

**Matt. 15:37** And they all ate, and were satisfied. And the leftovers they took up from the fragments were seven baskets full.

**And they all ate, and were satisfied. And the leftovers they took up from the fragments were seven baskets full.** Leftovers again.

**Matt. 15:38** And those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children.

**Note on variant readings:** Some manuscripts read *about* before *four thousand men*. Other manuscripts read *as* before *four thousand men*.

**And those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children.** There are significant differences between the two feedings of the multitudes.

First, is the different number of loaves, baskets and people—though the overall scale is still vast. Second, the use of the giving of thanks (Eucharist) makes the foreshadowing of the Lord's supper even more obvious.

Third, in this Gentile context a different word for basket is used. The word used for baskets in the feeding of the five thousand is typically associated with Jews.

**Matt. 15:39** And after dismissing the crowds, he got into the boat and came unto the region of Magadan.

**Note on a variant reading:** Some manuscripts read *Dalmanutha* instead of *Magadan*.

**And after dismissing the crowds, he got into the boat and came unto the region of Magadan.** After formally dismissing the crowd Jesus goes to the region of Magadan of which the exact location is unknown. Mark calls it Dalmanutha.

### SUMMARY TO CHAPTER 15

After another confrontation with the religious leaders, Jesus moves to Gentile country. He heals the daughter of a Canaanite woman.

Jesus then feeds another multitude by miraculous means. This group is made up of Gentiles rather than Jews. Matthew continues his emphasis that Jesus has come for more than the nation Israel, Jesus is the world's Savior.

### QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 15

#### WHY DID JESUS TREAT THE CANAANITE WOMAN SO HARSHLY?

The treatment of Jesus toward the Canaanite woman has raised many questions. Jesus' words appear harsh and insensitive to this woman who wanted to see her demon-possessed daughter healed. The actions seem so unlike Him. In the Gospels He is portrayed as a kind, loving, and compassionate man but here He seems just the opposite.

The problem in this text is the apparent inconsistency of Jesus' words and behavior with His known character and teachings found throughout the Gospels. This inconsistency should alert us to the possibility that a superficial reading of this text may be incorrect. There are several matters which we should note:

- (1) Matthew did not see it as contradictory with the other events they recorded in the life of Christ. He certainly would not have included it in His gospel if He thought it gave a different picture of Jesus.
- (2) The woman in the story is not deterred with Jesus' indifference toward her. She does not think Jesus' reply is so negative that no response is possible, therefore she continues with the conversation. It is as though his answer to her challenges her to respond.
- (3) There are two terms that Jesus uses that softens the apparent harshness of His words. The term for "dogs" that He uses is the Greek word *kunaria* which refers to "pet housedogs" or "puppies." It is not the term *kunes* which refers to "wild dogs" or "scavengers." This shows that Jesus did not think that all Gentiles were dogs. Therefore if the term dogs is replaced with puppies then much of the harshness is removed from His statement.
- (4) According to the parallel account in Mark, Jesus said let the children be fed first. He did not say let *only* the children be fed but rather let the children be the first to be fed. Again, this removes some of the harshness from the statement.
- (5) Finally, it should be noted that Jesus spoke with the woman prior to the point of the seemingly harsh statement. The Greek text has the word *elegen*, which is in the imperfect tense (meaning continuous action in past time). Therefore His words are not a one-time rejection of her request but rather words spoken in the middle of a dialogue. The woman's response assumes that the dialogue is not over. The text suggests that the woman senses that she is expected to respond to the words of Jesus.

One of the problems with a written text is that the tone of voice cannot be recorded. In any conversation the change in tone, a wink or a smile suggest how the words are to be interpreted. Since we do not have the tone of Jesus voice recorded for us we must find hints from the passage concerning how it is to be understood. It seems that Jesus is engaging in this conversation with the Syrophonecian woman to bring her into a deeper faith in the Lord. This is accomplished in her reply.