

## **Bible Study Guide: Week of 8-10-2020**

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

### **Matthew 15:10-28**

10 Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." 12 Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" 13 He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." 15 But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." 16 Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." 24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

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**10 Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."**

Jesus' teaching about defilement here follows a discussion he had with the Pharisees and scribes (15:1-9) in which the Pharisees and scribes question the fact that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before they eat, as was the tradition of the elders. It is important to note that such a washing was a ritual cleansing, not a practical one. We wash hands before we eat today to prevent the spread of germs; the washing described by the Pharisees and scribes here was for ritual, not literal cleanliness. Being "clean" or "unclean" is a hard concept for our modern minds to grasp, but the key aim was to maintain holiness and reverence in all aspects of life. The assumption of the Pharisees and scribes is that by refusing to wash before eating, the disciples were neglecting matters of holiness and righteousness. In this preceding passage Jesus questions the intentions of the scribes and Pharisees, pointing out that they honor human traditions more than they honor God in their words and actions. Jesus accuses them of maintaining the ritual appearances of holiness, while living and acting in unholy ways toward others. After pointing out their hypocrisy, Jesus addresses the crowd, contradicting the teachings of the Pharisees and scribes. Rather than being defiled by eating with unwashed hands, he argues that one is defiled by what one does with those hands. Rather than being made

unholy by eating something “unclean,” Jesus argues one is made unholy by speaking evil against others. Ritual purity doesn’t matter when one is living in an unrighteous and profane manner in how they treat others.

**12 Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" 13 He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."**

It is no wonder the Pharisees take offense at Jesus’ words—he has spoken quite harshly against them and their teachings here. Jesus realizes that their authority is doomed to fall and fail. This in some ways anticipates the destruction of the Temple and the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 AD, but it also points toward the rise of the new community Jesus instituted that would become the early church.

*Nota Bene: As always when we talk about Jewish customs, culture, and people, we need to be careful that we do not interpret this passage in anti-Semitic ways that do harm to our Jewish neighbors today. We should never forget that Paul affirms in Romans 11:26-29 that “All Israel will be saved” and “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.” We should not be quick to dismiss Judaism as rigidly legalistic or as irrelevant in light of the Christian church’s rise to prominence. Jesus was debating with a particular group of religious leaders who managed to miss the larger points of righteousness Jesus wanted to highlight because they were more insistent on the rituals and practices that undergirded and facilitated living out that righteousness God calls God’s people to.*

**15 But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." 16 Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."**

Jesus’ preceding words are not strictly a parable, which may explain why Jesus’ reaction is to ask if the disciples (the *you* is plural here) are still without understanding. As is typical, Peter stands in for and epitomizes the other 11 disciples here. His question indicates that he doesn’t understand Jesus has been teaching plainly, not in parables as he did earlier in the gospel. When Mark tells this story (Mark 7:19) he adds the comment that “Jesus thus declared all foods clean.” Matthew does not understand Jesus to be striking down all the dietary laws, but rather taking exception with the oral traditions of the Pharisees and scribes.

Jesus’ reply to the disciples in vs. 17-20 seems to connect back to vs. 11 and earlier rather than to his most recent words about God uprooting any plant that God did not plant and about “the blind leading the blind.” He seems to take Peter’s request at face value and offers a further explanation of his words of instruction about defilement and purity since the disciples have not clearly understood what Jesus was trying to get across. His explanation is basically that, contrary to the teachings of the Pharisees and scribes, anything that is eaten in a ritually impure way doesn’t stay in the body long enough to permanently defile a person—it “goes out into the sewer” eventually. Rather, he says, it is what comes up the other way—out of the heart, out of the mouth, and into the world—that truly makes a person unrighteous and unholy. Even in modern terms, in some sense, we know this to be true. If a person “eats right” all the time and has a perfectly healthy diet and outwardly maintains the trappings of “right living,” but treats other people like garbage, we would not want to be around such a person. We would not say that such a person reflects God’s love and goodness.

**21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."**

The “district of Tyre and Sidon” refers to two cities in ancient Phoenicia (modern-day Lebanon), roughly a hundred miles due-north of Jerusalem as the crow flies. Matthew gives us no reason why Jesus would visit such a region, but his presence there is somewhat surprising because it was a heavily gentile area and well outside the normal boundaries (both religious and geographical) inside which Jesus normally ministered. He seems to have been

retreating from the tense encounter with the Pharisees and scribes, perhaps (the word translated here as “went away” literally means “to withdraw.” The connotation of this word is to move away from danger or threat.) Still, this does not explain his movement into a heavily gentile region. The woman he encounters is described here as a “Canaanite.” The Jewish people who entered the promised land out of Egypt and their descendants had a very tense relationship with the Canaanite people. This tension is evident in the cold greeting the woman receives from Jesus and his disciples, as well as in the somewhat hostile exchange between Jesus and the woman.

**23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."**

Jesus’ initial response is to ignore the woman. We may be surprised by his refusal to speak to her, much less to grant her request. The disciples urge Jesus to dismiss the woman on account of her “shouting.” The Greek word here means to “cry out” or “shriek.” The connotation is that the woman is being too loud and obnoxious and it is irritating to the disciples. Unfortunately, women today are often dismissed as “shrill” or “loud” or “abrasive” if they are outspoken and insistent as this woman is here. In this passage, Matthew challenges many underlying assumptions that Jewish folks would have held in Jesus’ day and age. For us today, we can also be challenged to look beyond our own categories and assumptions and limits we place on God’s mercy and on people we view as less than worthy to receive good things from God.

**24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."**

Jesus reiterates his mission and message are intended primarily for “the lost sheep of the house of Israel”—the same group to which he sent the Apostles in Matthew 10:6. As we will see, this Canaanite woman pushes the edges of God’s mercy ever wider and causes Jesus’ followers (both in Matthew’s day and in our day) to ponder anew the extent and limits of God’s ability to reach out to the lost. One of the ways this woman does this is evident in her addresses to Jesus. In verses 22 and 25, she addresses him as “Lord.” And in vs. 22 she added “Son of David”—both terms used in early Christian worship and familiar to Jewish folks in the first century. Also in vs. 22 she asks, “Have mercy on me.” This phrase was also common in early Christian worship. It is common even in our worship today. Our “Kyrie” in worship is from the Greek phrase “Kyrie Eleison,” meaning “Lord, have Mercy.” In vs. 25, she also seems to almost echo Peter’s words from last week’s text when he cried out while sinking on the sea, “Lord, save me!” She also kneels before Jesus; a posture of prayer and reverence and submission. This also would have been familiar to early Christian worshippers.

**26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.**

Much to our surprise (and perhaps horror) Jesus doesn’t receive her worship or adoration at face value. Instead, he essentially tells her that her status as a Canaanite woman is comparable to the family pet rather than as a true child of the household (as an Israelite would be considered, expanding the metaphor from vs. 24 about the lost sheep of the house of Israel). Rather than taking offense or challenging Jesus’ premise, she plays right into his critique: “So I’m a dog—but the dogs get the crumbs, remember?” What this woman points out and what Jesus enacts here is the fact that God’s mercy is abundant enough that even those who are considered least and lowest by the world’s standards are able to receive grace and sustenance from God’s table. Rather than God’s mercy being a zero-sum game in which the Children of Israel feast and the Children of Canaan starve, there is mercy enough for all. In a real sense, the woman helps Jesus act out one of the central tenets of the Jewish faith—that Abraham and his offspring exist in part to bless the nations. God’s promise to Abraham, after all, was not just that he would have many offspring, but that all families of the world would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:2-3). Here that blessing comes to pass in a very tangible way. This woman received the overflow of mercy and blessing that God promised to give to “the nations.” This is why Jesus commends her faith—she understood the heart of God’s covenant with God’s people and God’s promises of mercy and blessing to all people. Further, she received what she fervently requested—her daughter’s healing.

**Discussion/Reflection Questions:**

- 1. How do you think Jesus' teaching about what defiles us applies to our lives and actions today? What would it mean for us to live in a pure and righteous and holy way in all that we do?**
- 2. Does it bother you that Jesus at first ignores the woman and then basically calls her a dog? Why do you think Jesus initially seems resistant to her pleas?**
- 3. What limits do we place today on God's mercy and blessing? Whom would we consider to be "dogs" who would be unworthy to receive what God has to offer?**