

Hypocritical Pharisees, Believing Gentiles**Matthew 15:15—28**

Although Christ condemned the Pharisees for their traditions, there is actually nothing wrong or sinful with having traditions. In fact, it's hard to get through life without having some traditions in your life. A tradition is nothing more than a custom or pattern or way of doing things that is passed down to other generations. It could be as simple as preparing a certain food for Thanksgiving or it could be important religious or moral teachings and beliefs that are handed down. I don't believe it was wrong for the priests to introduce additional hand washings before eating but it was wrong to elevate these practices to the level of Scripture. In fact, the Pharisees took their practices and made them mandatory commands while ignoring direct commands from God laid out in the Law. They in effect put their authority above God's authority and did so to their advantage. Their own rules gave them power over the people while they would bend God's commandments to benefit them financially.

Jesus explains the parable (verses 15—20; Mark 7:17—23)

Jesus had just explained that a man is not defiled by what goes into the mouth but by what comes out of a man's mouth. The Disciples didn't understand what Christ meant by this parable and Peter asked Jesus to explain. Jesus was, of course, talking about spiritual things while the Disciples were thinking in terms of the physical. The Pharisees were so very careful to purify their hands before eating and by doing this they thought they would avoid corrupting themselves. Jesus said that anything a man eats is not able to defile him. His defilement does not come from the food he eats but comes from a wicked heart. The inside of a man will be reflected on the outside with immoral behavior including evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, and envy, slander, pride and foolishness (Mark 7:21—22).

Jesus is referring to the Pharisees who think that they are righteous within themselves (Luke 16:15; 18:9—14; Matthew 23:1—12). Imagine how full of themselves they were to put their traditions above God's law. Righteousness can only come from God and until the leaders of Israel recognize that they will only be as righteous as their wicked hearts will allow.

Paul states that we can either be a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness (Romans 6:16—18). Everyone who attempts to be righteous through their own works is actually a slave to sin. Those who rely on Jesus Christ, who have wholly trusted Him for an eternity in heaven, are slaves to righteousness. A person who simply believes completely and exclusively in the person and work of Jesus Christ is assured of an eternity of living with Him (1 Corinthians 15:1—4). There is absolutely no work that we can do to add to the finished work of Christ. The person who tries to add anything to complete his or her salvation is no better than the Pharisees who thought their own self-defined form of righteousness was sufficient to gain them entrance into the Millennial Kingdom.

All foods declared clean (Mark 7:19)

There is an interesting statement appended at the end of verse 19 in some translations. Mark comments that all food is now okay to eat after Jesus said eating foods does not defile a man. This, however, does not agree with what Peter understands because when the sheet of unclean foods came down from heaven, Peter refused to eat because it was not lawful (Acts 10:9—16). Jesus also states He did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). How then could Mark say that Jesus abolished the eating requirements of the Mosaic Law?

There are those who would say this points to a corruption of the text, that this is a heretical statement that has no place in Scripture. This answer is reactionary based on a strong bias against certain versions of the Bible. The simple answer lies in understanding the context. This whole section deals with washing and not clean or unclean foods. The Law already defines what foods are lawful to eat. The topic is about eating

foods with washed or unwashed hands. In this context, Mark states that all foods are (ceremonially) okay to eat. All lawful foods are declared clean to eat without going through the special hand washings of the Pharisees.

The Syrophenician woman (15:20—28; Mark 7:24—30)

From Galilee, Jesus traveled approximately 30 miles NE to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea around the city of Tyre. This is the northernmost point of the land promised to Israel but at the time of Jesus it was known as the Galilee of the Gentiles (Matthew 4:15). Israel was to be the possessors of the land but because of her sin of disobedience, the Gentiles were in control. It was here that a Canaanite woman, a Gentile, approached Jesus to implore Him to cast out the demon that had taken control of her young daughter. Jesus ignored her.

There are a number of explanations as to why Jesus did not answer her. Some say He was prejudice against women or Canaanites and that He was now learning to be open to ministering to them. Others say He was testing her faith and teaching her to be patient and by so doing giving us a lesson about being persistent.

The only way to properly understand this section comes by understanding dispensationally what is going on. In Matthew 10:6 Jesus sent out His Disciples with the instructions to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. They were specifically told to avoid going to the Gentiles. He emphasized His mission in Matthew 15:24 when He said He was sent only to Israel. Putting Israel first, beginning in Jerusalem, is how the Disciples were to carry out the so-called Great Commission (Luke 24:47) with an expansion of these instructions to the Disciples given in Acts 1:8. It is here we see that the proper order of spreading the Gospel of the Kingdom is to begin in Jerusalem. Once the leadership of Israel has believed then they should expand their ministry throughout the region of Judea, then out to Samaria. So far only Israel is involved. Only after the message is accepted by Israel are the disciples to expand the Gospel of the Kingdom to the Gentiles. Notice that since the leadership rejected the Gospel of the Kingdom that the Disciples are still in Jerusalem as late as Acts 21:18—20, approximately 25 years after Jesus told them to go out into the whole world. In addition, all the signs of healings, casting out demons and miracles were to announce the coming of the Kingdom. These signs were for the nation of Israel, not the Gentiles.

With this background, the reason Jesus ignored the Syrophenician woman was because His ministry was to the Jews. Only after the Jews accepted the Gospel of the Kingdom would they turn to evangelize the Gentiles. So why did Jesus relent and heal the woman's daughter? I believe it was because she understood the Kingdom program, knew her place in it and worshiped Christ for who He was, the Messiah of Israel.

So the question that should be asked isn't why Jesus didn't answer the woman but why did He talk to her at all? First She calls Jesus the Son of David, recognizing Him as the rightful King to rule over Israel. In acknowledging Him as King she was acknowledging Him as Messiah. She also understood that the children, the favored ones, the ones through whom God was currently working, were Israelites (Deuteronomy 14:1; Hosea 11:1; Romans 9:4—5). She also understood her place under the table gathering crumbs that fall off of Israel's table. A table speaks of blessing and prosperity and provision (Psalm 23:6; Luke 22:30). In the Kingdom, the Gentiles will be blessed through God blessing Israel (Isaiah 60:1—9; 2:1—4; Psalm 67). This is all in agreement with the Abrahamic Covenant found in Genesis 12:3. Gentiles will be blessed or cursed depending upon how they treat Israel. This seems to show that Jesus had compassion for the Gentiles even though His focus was on Israel. Once Israel was saved then Gentiles could benefit from God blessing them through Israel. Since God has set Israel aside temporarily (Romans 11:11) the Abrahamic Covenant is not currently in effect in this Age of Grace.

As a side note, this is the only recorded miracle that Jesus did in this area. This is in contrast to the thousands of miracles that were performed in and around Galilee. According to Matthew 11:21—22 if Jesus had done as many miracles in Tyre and Sidon as were done in Galilee, they would have repented. Even though this area was promised to Israel, the area was populated by a very high percentage of Gentiles.

For previous notes and additional mid-Acts materials please visit www.MidActsTruths.com