

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 53, Chapter 15

Today we start Matthew chapter 15. The first 20 verses represent perhaps one of the most controversial segments of any Gospel account. There is a parallel account of this same incident in Mark 7. We'll look it at as well because it adds some needed information.

Before we do that, however, we need to recall that Matthew's is easily the most Jewish of any of the Gospels. He assumes a Jewish reader audience, and some of the earliest of the Early Church Fathers claim that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew and only later translated into the Greek. The way Matthew presents his work, and some of the Jewish idioms that are clearly embedded (most of which are obscured by their translation into Greek and then to English), as well as the way he puts matters that seem to require a certain level of inherent knowledge by his readers of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jewish Law and Jewish customs, locations of places in the Holy Land, and other things that Jews would know as common knowledge but gentiles wouldn't, make it highly probable that it was first written in Hebrew.

Mark on the other hand included some explanations of things that would be completely superfluous to Jews, but was needed to help provide some background for Gentiles. It implies that he expected his audience to be mostly gentiles who were Romans.

There's one other factor that we must consider. The earliest known complete manuscripts of the Gospels that we have are from about 350 A.D. It is fairly conclusive that all the Gospel accounts had been written from the middle to the end of the 1st century. Therefore the earliest New Testament texts that we have

are from about 250 years **after** the originals were written. They had been copied and re-copied countless times by 350 A.D. so we must never think that what we possess are the original NT documents just because they are in Greek. What we have is, except for Matthew, copies in the **original language** they were written; but that is all. This also means that it is not proven that what we have is word for word the way the various authors first penned the many New Testament books. This is not to say that there is a verifiable difference since we don't have the originals to compare; so we can't say with certainty whether there are or are not differences. But it is very nearly inevitable that some small amount of editing and editorializing (even error) had to occur over 2 1/2 centuries of hand copying done by scores of different people, and Mark 7 has strong evidence of some editorializing in a couple of key passages. Even more (and this is perhaps the most crucial point), the copying occurred within the Gentile Christian Church (the Jews certainly held no interest during this time period in Jesus or Paul or Christianity). Even some of the most conservative Bible scholars admit that there is strong evidence of later Christian influence that was woven into some of the New Testament accounts.

Do not think that I'm suggesting that the New Testament books that we have today are flawed. I'm saying that when something (a verse, a comment) within a book simply doesn't fit, or seems to go against earlier teachings, we need to hold them suspect that a later Christian editor had a hand in it. At other times it is very likely a legitimate issue of Gentile Christians misunderstanding Jewish concepts and words and expressions and so choosing wrong words to translate; because by the time of 350 A.D. the New Testament documents the Church had and were copying already had become the province of a Gentiles-only institution that was openly anti-Semitic in their doctrines.

Before we read Matthew chapter 15 I will also make one more explanation (since I get regular emails on the subject). It concerns my use of the term doctrines. The term doctrines is from its dictionary definition, generally speaking, a neutral term; it is neither a negative nor a positive. A Judeo-Christian doctrine is said to be a faith principle or rule based on a biblical interpretation. Early in the Holy Scriptures, the term doctrines was used to describe faith principles sent down from God through His prophets and through Moses. However today, within the Christian Church, the term doctrines simply means what committees of men that belong to specific denominations have created as their Church rules and principles. When I use the term doctrines, it nearly always means manmade Christian rules and statements. This doesn't mean that all doctrines are wrong.

Rather the issue is that over the centuries the Church has significantly veered away from direct biblical instruction and instead has embraced Christian customs and rules derived by various groups of men, and imposed upon them on the members of the few thousand different Christian denominations. So when I use the word doctrines, I do mean it as something contrived by humans and so it is mostly a negative term.

Let's read all of Matthew chapter 15.

READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 15 all

This chapter opens with a confrontation between Yeshua and some Pharisees and Scribes hailing from Jerusalem. As verse 12 tells us, it must have been a pretty testy exchange that had the onlookers on edge. Once again we don't see a meek and mild Christ backing away from a skirmish with self-important Jewish religious leaders; our Messiah has a backbone. In fact, sometimes He seeks out a confrontation. Here, however, it was they who sought Him out.

The first thing to visualize is that these are synagogue leaders that are coming to do theological battle with Yeshua. The second is that they are coming from Jerusalem, the piety center of the Holy Land. This is a pertinent piece of information that is included because the religious leaders who lived in Jerusalem were the most rigid, demanding, and confrontational. Jerusalem was, for centuries, the religious center of the world for Hebrews and so the most orthodox lived there and studied there at the several religious academies. Besides it being the place from which the many Hebrew kings lived and ruled, the Temple and Priesthood were also located there so there was an extra high sense of spiritualism for those who chose to live there, especially if they were religious leaders and teachers.

Notice that it was not the Priests or Levites who regularly come to do battle with Yeshua nor was it this time. The Temple system seems to have taken little notice of Him so far. It was the synagogue system and the Pharisees and Scribes that ran it who saw a real and growing threat to their authority brewing. So in the end, this is what these confrontations were all about.

Before we go any further, let's read several verses from Mark 7.

READ MARK CHAPTER 7:1- 15

So the issue for these synagogue leaders is this: they had been observing Yeshua and His disciples for some time (because they were aware of this growing competition from a mere carpenter from the Galilee) and they were put off that His disciples didn't wash their hands before eating; something these Jerusalem synagogue leaders held as sacrosanct. This washing they speak of had little to do with hygiene; it was a ritual ceremonial matter. The ritual was called *n'tilat-yadayim*. Matthew 15:2 has these religious leaders saying that the disciples (and no doubt Yeshua Himself) are breaking the rules of the Traditions of the Elders. So it is critical that we understand something fundamental to this entire scene: this had nothing to do with Holy Scripture...the Torah or the Law of Moses. This was strictly about the Traditions of the Elders.

Traditions of the Elders is also known as Jewish Law, Oral Law, Oral Torah and Halachah. That is, this is not about biblical laws and instructions as given by God and found in the written Torah. These are not things told to Moses by God and recorded in what we now call the Old Testament. Rather these are manmade commands and laws created by the Jewish religious authorities who meant to rule over the Jewish religious institutions and the Jews who were connected to them. Or better yet: this is all about rules for the synagogue. The Temple authorities... beginning with the High Priest... were not in the business of making laws and traditions. In fact one of the reasons that the Sadducees and Pharisees were usually at odds with one another is that the Sadducees did not accept these Traditions and Jewish Laws as legitimate. While the Priesthood leadership itself may have been corrupt and illegitimate nonetheless the Sadducees (that was the political/religious party of the Priesthood) claimed to accept only the authority of the written biblical Torah. That they didn't practice what they preached is another matter.

The reason I began today's discussion by explaining what I mean when I say "doctrines", and the negative sense in which I usually use the term, it is because it corresponds precisely to the Traditions of the Elders. That is, while Christians point to their doctrines as their Church rules, Jews point to their Traditions as their synagogue rules. In both cases these are human contrived rules and regulations that are invariably taught as though they came from God's mouth. As we see when we read this passage from Matthew 15, Matthew and Yeshua absolutely use the term "Traditions of the Elders" as a negative. So to repeat: the argument that ensues between Christ and the Pharisees has nothing to do with Holy Scripture. There's nothing for us to learn about the Law of Moses or any of the Holy Scriptures here, because that isn't the subject.

Something else that must be noticed. The specific point of debate is ritual hand washing. Thus, the debate is framed for us as if it were in brackets. The opening bracket is verse 2 (when the complaint of the Pharisees and Scribes is made), then the body of the argument is presented, and finally the closing bracket is verse 20 (when Jesus concludes His teaching against this ritual hand washing demand). That is, the entire subject being addressed is placed in a kind of self-standing bubble. The subject is ritual hand washing and nothing else. There is nothing here about Kosher food; what is permitted to eat and what is not (even though Christianity centers its doctrine on the abolition of biblically kosher eating on this paragraph).

The conservative Bible scholar W.D. Davies in his 2000 page commentary on Matthew says this:

"Against Meier and others, we do not find in Matthew 15 an abolition of the OT purity laws. Not only would such an interpretation run afoul of other Matthean texts, but the decisive statement in Mark 7:19 (that all food are clean) has been omitted... the evangelist's (Matthew's) concern is not with the Old Testament but with the Pharisees and their paradosis (this means a historical tradition)"

So one doesn't have to be a modern day Messianic or Hebrew Roots adherent to readily see that this section of Matthew has nothing to do with kosher eating or with the biblical Torah; only with manmade rules and regulations. But when an 1800 year old Christian Church doctrine is that Christians don't have to abide by anything in the Old Testament, then all New Testament interpretation necessarily comes to the conclusion that, among other things, all purity laws are gone as well as all of God's food laws... regardless of what the words of the Bible might say.

CJB Matthew 5:17-20 ¹⁷ "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete. ¹⁸ Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened. ¹⁹ So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness is far greater than that of the Torah-teachers and P'rushim, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven!"

Notice in this profound statement from Matthew 5 not just the familiar denial by Christ that He came to abolish the Torah and the Prophets, but rather the final few words that blistered the Scribes and Pharisees where He says that unless a Jew's righteousness is greater than that of their synagogue religious leaders, no entry into the Kingdom of Heaven is possible. So now to begin Matthew chapter 15 we see that the Scribes and Pharisees have counted strict adherence to the Traditions of the Elders... to manmade Jewish Law... as their righteousness. The circle is closed. What Jesus was talking about in Matthew 5:20 is exactly the scene that is unfolding in the first 20 verses of Matthew 15. That is, Jews (and all humanity) are going to be judged by God NOT by the traditions of Judaism (or Christianity), but rather by God's words... Holy Scripture.

I'll be talking more about the Christian Church soon, but for now I want to speak directly to Jews (and some gentiles) who identify themselves as Messianic Believers in Yeshua of Nazareth. I have noticed a troubling trend within some branches of Messianic Synagogues of wanting to do Talmud study as much or more than Scripture study. I have noticed an increase in the adoption of rigid rules and regulations of Orthodox Judaism about many details of life that has the potential to detract from learning God's Word and following Yeshua's ways. Maintaining one's Jewishness is admirable, good, and ought to be done. But be careful; too much focus on Traditions can lead in some cases to giving up God's words for man's words, which does great damage to our souls and our relationship with the Lord.

It is one thing to look to ancient Jewish literature to learn about the mindset, history, and the ways of early Judaism to help us better understand biblical times. There are even some solid biblical insights buried in those volumes that are quite profound and profitable for all followers of Jesus; Jews and gentiles. But we need to be on guard not to be led into thinking that the doing of these Traditions represents the righteousness that God requires of us. I'm not concerned about things like the detailed ways that biblical holidays and feasts are celebrated according to Judaism because mostly those are perfectly fine cultural customs and preferences. In fact, there is much there to consider and perhaps adopt in order to flush away centuries of the paganism that has infiltrated Christian traditions. Rather I'm concerned about what Yeshua says I'm supposed to be concerned about: manmade doctrines taken as having the equivalent authority as God's Word.

Quite interestingly, Yeshua wasn't the only one to question, contradict and shun

the teachings of manmade traditions in His Jewish culture. The Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls also had their axe to grind. In the document 1QH 4:14 - 15 we read:

"Teachers of lies and seers of falsehoods have schemed against me in a devilish scheme, to exchange the law engraved on my heart by Thee for the smooth things (which they speak) to Thy people".

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the teachers of the smooth things are said to be the Pharisees. So this is, of course, speaking about Traditions of the Elders as against the "law engraved on my heart"... The Law of Moses.

In Matthew 15:3 Yeshua does something typical for Him: He answers a question with a question. After the Pharisees' accusation of His disciples not obeying the Tradition of the Elders by doing a ritual hand washing before eating, Yeshua asks them why they break God's commands by adhering so devotedly to their Traditions. The meaning is plain: their ritual hand washing tradition breaks God's commandments. Nowhere in the Law of Moses does God require His people (at least the non-priests) to wash their hands before eating: ceremonially or otherwise. What is the reason for this Tradition about hand washing? It is meant to wash off any ritual uncleanness so that it won't be transferred to their food. Where would this ritual uncleanness have occurred? Mark 7:4 gives us one such example and reveals the real motivation behind the invention of the hand washing ritual: the proximity of Jews to gentiles in the marketplace.

The Jews had for a few centuries by Yeshua's day considered gentiles as inherently unclean people. This principle had become thoroughly embedded in the Jewish religion. Since the Jews had been under foreign kings for hundreds of years, and lately that king was the Emperor of Rome, then gentiles overran the Holy Land. Jerusalem was full of gentiles; even the Temple grounds had curious gentile onlookers at the religious ceremonies. So were all the marketplaces...everywhere in the Holy Land... full of gentiles who now lived there and so shopped there. For Jews, this meant that everything the gentiles touched was made unclean. Again; this was not at all a biblical principle, it was a Tradition handed down from the Jewish Elders. But as happens whether in Judaism or in Christianity, the line eventually blurs between Tradition and Scripture and invariably Tradition wins out because whether it is to please or to control the congregation, human rules and doctrines are more naturally accepted than God's rules and laws.

Mark records in the same verse that in addition to the hand washing, the Pharisees require a ceremonial washing of cups, pots, bronze vessels, and other things. This is because in the Torah if a cup or a pot had something unclean in it, and if the cup or pot was porous (clay, which was the most common type of material used for cups and pots) and thus would have absorbed some of the contents, it had to be destroyed. Bronze vessels on the other hand were not porous and so something unclean in them wouldn't be absorbed and thus with a quick washing out it could be used again. But the Pharisees had twisted this command of God such that if a proper ritual washing (as defined and sanctioned by them) was done for any object, then the uncleanness was cured. Tradition trumps Scripture.

Yeshua next goes one step further. He brings up another Tradition that apparently really bothered Him as an example of how perverted the Jewish Law had become such that it blatantly broke one of the most fundamental of all Laws of God, as found in the 10 Commandments: Honor your father and your mother. Jesus reminds these synagogue leaders that the penalty that God prescribes in the Torah for refusing to honor your mother and father is death. However it had become a practice... a loophole, really... that in order to look good and to get favor with the Temple authorities... and probably accompanied with a false belief that the more you gave to the Temple the more you were in good stead with God... whatever was needed to care for one's parents could instead be redirected and given as *korban*... an offering.... to the Temple. Thus leaving one's parents in a bad way (there were no pensions or 401K's in that era). Yeshua says that to honor this terrible Tradition is to make God's law to honor one's parents null and void... to abolish it.

Folks, as much as we want to, we simply can't have it both ways. We either obey God's laws or the traditions of men, especially when performing a tradition of men contradicts a law of God. Let me give you just a few examples pertinent to the modern Christian Church.

Jesus told us in His Sermon on the Mount that not only has He **not** abolished the Torah but that anyone who intentionally disobeys and teaches against the Torah will be given the status of least in the eternal Kingdom of Heaven. What does the Church say? It says nonsense; regardless of what He said Jesus DID abolish the Torah, and that to obey it is sin, and it is a serious offense to the institution of the Church such that you will likely be kicked out.

Both Old and New Testaments (including Revelation) rail against homosexuality as an abomination to God, saying unequivocally that those who would practice it will be barred from the Kingdom of Heaven, and it makes marriage strictly a union between a man and a woman. What does much of the modern Church say? They say that since Jesus is love, this abolishes such laws that were instituted by His harsh and severe Father. Gay people should be accepted as they are, with no intent to help them towards repentance because their lifestyle is no longer considered wrong. And further, marriage can be anything we say it is including between couples of the same sex long as they love each other.

God ordains in His Word that those who worship Him are to celebrate the Biblical Feasts in perpetuity. The Church says "no" to this; it is much too Jewish and instead created a number of non-biblical gentile traditions and celebrations that demands allegiance to them as the truest validation of our Christianity. Among these are Easter and Christmas that were from the beginning created by men (gentile men) as anti-Jewish, heathen appeasing celebrations that adopted a number of pagan elements.

God says to keep the Sabbath on the 7th day. The Church says the Sabbath is dead and gone so now we celebrate something new called The Lord's Day. And, that for those that want a Sabbath, any day we choose is fine with God. I've probably offended sufficiently so I'll move on. Please just consider that what I told you is the biblical truth... backed up by Scripture, in context, even if it is uncomfortable to hear... and it is in the same vein as what Yeshua has just told those Scribes and Pharisees.

"You hypocrites," Yeshua says to them. Then He again invokes the Prophet Isaiah to further admonish. What we read in verses 8 and 9 most approximates the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament). However in the Hebrew Old Testament it reads:

^{CJB} **Isaiah 29:13-14** *Then Adonai said: "Because these people approach me with empty words, and the honor they bestow on me is mere lip-service; while in fact they have distanced their hearts from me, and their 'fear of me' is just a mitzvah of human origin-¹⁴ therefore, I will have to keep shocking these people with astounding and amazing things, until the 'wisdom' of their 'wise ones' vanishes, and the 'discernment' of their 'discerning ones' is hidden away."*

Clearly what Yeshua is saying by invoking the words of Isaiah is that even though the Scribes and the Pharisees claim they are worshiping and glorifying God by creating mounds of manmade rules, in fact it has no efficacy or effect; it's beyond worthless, it's offensive. This is because whatever intent they have towards God, it's wrong minded, shallow, insincere and unacceptable to Him. The laws (the *mitzvot*) they follow to demonstrate their fear of God are alien to Him; they are not of Heavenly origin but rather come from human minds. So, the ones that claim discernment and wisdom (the religious leaders) will eventually be proven as offering nothing of value and their doctrines will evaporate as surely as steam does after it rises for a couple of seconds from a boiling pot.

In verse 10 Yeshua shifts His attention to the crowd that is witnessing all this. He is no longer addressing the Pharisees and Scribes but rather talking around them so that they can understand what has just transpired. And what He says is a direct frontal attack on all they hold dear. Picture an astonished crowd and a shocked group of disciples. He begins with "listen up, and get this through your heads". He then goes on to say: ***"What makes a person unclean is not what goes into his mouth; rather, what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him unclean!"*** Aha! says the Christian Church. Jesus has just abolished kosher eating. Remember what I told you several minutes ago; none of this passage is about Holy Scripture or about kosher eating. It's not about food per se. What is this entire debate about? Purity regulations. Ritual, ceremonial hand washing before eating as required by a Tradition. So, what Yeshua is saying to the crowd upholds the Torah and is told to them in a form of a wisdom saying or perhaps a proverb. There is no requirement from the Law of Moses to ritually wash hands before eating in order to satisfy purity laws. That the hands of a Jew touches something that has been in contact with a gentile doesn't affect the purity (the cleanliness) of the food a Jew may eat at a later time.

But no, say most Christian Bible commentators; Jesus changed the subject entirely when He turned to talk to the crowds. As we say in America, he changed horses in mid-stream. He abruptly stopped talking about ritual hand washing and inexplicably turned to the crowd to abolish God's food laws. This is why I spoke earlier about thinking of this section as if were contained in brackets, or in a bubble, so that you are not distracted or deceived by manmade Church doctrines. The section begins with the question of ritual hand washing in verse 2, and it ends with the final words Jesus says to the crowd in verse 20 concerning the same subject: ***"These are what really makes a person unclean, but eating without doing n'tilat-yadayim does NOT make a person unclean"***. And the

things that Jesus is referring to when He says **"These are what really makes a person unclean"** are a list of sins we find in verse 19, as biblically defined violations of the Law of Moses.

In verse 13 the horrified disciples turn to their Master and ask Him: **"Do you know that the P'rushim (the Pharisees) were offended by what you said?"** This was a kind of knee-jerk admonishment to Yeshua. Christ's words had been strong, unequivocal, and said with full intent of trashing the Jewish Law about ritual hand washing, and for that matter all Jewish Law (Traditions of the Elders) that were manmade and ran counter to the Torah (which is why in His argument He used as an example another sinful tradition of the Pharisees about using money to support elderly parents for instead giving to the Temple). If a Pastor said these severe words and his deacons or elders told him that he had offended the higher-ups and others of his religion, apologies would have been immediately forthcoming because within modern Christianity we can't ever hold so strongly to the biblical truth, and forthrightly utter it in defense of God's written word, that is might upset people. Especially those in leadership along with us or above us. Where did we ever get such a false notion? When did we turn into such spiritual cowards? Certainly we don't get this from Yeshua's examples. His insistence on God's biblical truth as against manmade institutional doctrines is what led Him to the cruel cross. It was His constant refusals to bow down to deceived and wrong minded Jewish religious leaders... to **not** go with the flow of wrong minded Traditions... that caused both the Temple and synagogue leadership to gang up on Him and insist that the Roman government arrest and execute Him.

So, in verse 13, in reply to His startled and worried disciples, He says: **"Every plant my Father in heaven has NOT planted will be pulled up by the roots"**. Remember: back in chapter 13 Yeshua had spoken a series of Parables to explain what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. And in the Parables of the Tares (the weeds), He said that His disciples should not (generally speaking) pull out the roots of a weed among the congregation. A weed (a tare) was representative of seed that Satan had planted...members of Satan's Kingdom. Rather, it was God that would pull them out at the proper time. Well, God on earth, Christ, says that these particular Pharisees and Scribes that came to accuse Him and His followers of not obeying Traditions of the Elders are representative of the seeds NOT planted by His Father. The only other planter of spiritual seeds is the Devil. So Yeshua is saying bluntly, but in connection to His Parables, that this delegation from Jerusalem are plants that have grown from Satan's seed. And

following His own wisdom that He gave in the Parable of the Tares, in verse 14 He says: **"Let them be. They are blind guides. When a blind man guides another blind man, both will fall in the pit"**. That is, He doesn't intend to do anything against these Pharisees and Scribes. He's not going to march against them. He's not going to incite people against them. He's not going to try to have them removed from their positions of authority and power. Rather, in time, God Himself will handle it. And that time will probably be at the End of the Age, at the Final Harvest.

Yeshua calls these religious authorities blind guides. What is a guide? A person who leads, shows the way, and instructs. A guide who is blind walks in random directions, and will of course eventually walk into a pit since he is unable to see where he's actually going. The problem is, what happens when others follow this blind guide? There is a secular parable or proverb that is used in nearly every language that refers to bone-headed, wrong minded leaders as "the blind leading the blind". That is, a blind person looks to another blind person to lead them. Pretty foolish thing to do. The problem becomes acute when the blind person has no idea he's blind, and doesn't realize that the person he has hired to lead him is even more blind.

I could probably spend the next several minutes calling out certain leaders of our faith, both Jewish and gentile, leaders of both Judaism and Christianity, but as Jesus says in verse 15 after the astonished and now unsettled disciples ask Him to explain what He just said: **"Don't you understand even now?"** Please, hear me: If truly you cannot look at the congregation to which you belong, and the leadership that lead it...the leadership you look to for truth... and are still unable to discern whether those leaders are enlightened by God's illumination or are blinded by the darkness of their manmade thoughts and beliefs, then nothing more I can say that will help you. I can only imagine the exasperated tone of Yeshua's words to those men who He personally and privately took under His divine wing and taught... His very own disciples: "Don't you understand...even NOW?" But out of His limitless mercy and compassion, He explained to them using another metaphor and a sort of Parable to try to get them to see the wrongness of the lens through which they still viewed and judged the veracity of their Jewish religious leadership, and the rules and regulations... all manmade... to which they adhered.

We shall begin next time with His explanation.

