

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 54, Chapter 15 Continued

We'll continue this week in Matthew 15, one of the more challenging (and therefore controversial) chapters in the New Testament. At the same it is one of the most inspirational, instructional, and therefore among the most important for Believers to get right because it sets the foundation for several fundamental doctrines.

We stopped last week at verse 16 when, after giving a Parable to explain the problem about manmade Traditions, Yeshua is asked by Peter to explain it. Parables were created and spoken as simple literary devices to make a complex subject easier for regular folks to grasp. So an obviously exasperated Yeshua says to His disciples: "You don't understand even now?" Let's back up a bit so that we can reconstitute the all-important context of what, exactly, is transpiring in this scene and what it is that Jesus is trying to teach.

Yeshua and His disciples have been confronted by some Pharisees and Scribes (Synagogue leaders) that have come from Jerusalem to the Galilee for just that purpose. They want to expose Jesus as a heretic; a Jew who doesn't follow the all-important Jewish Traditions in the observance of His religion and thus shouldn't have the adoring following that He has gained. The religious leaders see Yeshua as a man who is painting outside the lines of nominal Jewish faith. So the issue they use to base their condemnation on has to do with the ritual purity laws... specifically ritual hand washing, which they say Yeshua's disciples are not doing. So the most salient point I can make.... and it needs to be made loud and clear... is that verses 1 - 20 are **entirely** about ritual hand washing and whatever spiritual results it provides.

Ritual hand washing is not to be found in the Torah; rather it was a Tradition of the Elders. The only ones among Israel who have certain commandments about washing are Priests and Levites and only in the performance of their Temple duties. Thus the basis for the debate is that Jesus sees the Pharisees and Scribes following, and demanding that others follow, human-contrived Traditions that in His view effectively override and violate certain laws of Moses handed down from The Father at Mt. Sinai.

Yeshua refers to these Synagogue leaders who insist on obedience to manmade Traditions (doctrines) over and above God's biblical rules and regulations as blind guides. In earlier chapters He called them wolves in sheep's clothing. Clearly He has little use for them and sees them as a stumbling block to the Jewish people's relationship with The Father instead of operating as the teachers of God's truth that they should be. So after publicly correcting these Synagogue leaders from Jerusalem and pointing out the error of their ways, Christ's disciples are shocked and worried that their Master would say such harsh and offensive things to these highly revered men (and in front of a large crowd of onlookers). It should be sinking in that the religious mindset of the disciples is causing them to do exactly what most Christians have done and continue to do. The disciples were victims of the tainted lenses through which they had been taught by the religious elite to view the world. They assume that if one of their Jewish religious leaders has the proper credentials, is popular, and is widely accepted as having official authority, then he automatically deserves not only respect, but to be believed without question. His position is the only proof needed of his rightness. So for a layman (like Yeshua is viewed as) to attack these Synagogue leaders' teachings as incorrect, and even to attack them personally by calling them names like blind guides, seems wrong even to His own disciples. The Synagogue leaders, due to their positions, are not asked to provide any proof for the validity of the ritual hand washing they demand; but Christ is asked to explain Himself for speaking against it. And as is typical, the religious leadership sees it as an affront to even be questioned by a layman over what they assert is the proper observance of the faith.

Let's read Christ's explanation in response to Peter's request.

### **RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 15 : 16 - 20**

Because Mark's Gospel has a parallel account of this incident, we need to read that as well in order to get added perspective but also to address the main

controversy of this story.

## **READ MARK CHAPTER 7 : 13 - 23**

Notice the key words in Mark that ensure that Mark's readers understand the sensitive issue at hand. This is Christ speaking:

**CJB Mark 7:13 <sup>13</sup> *Thus, with your tradition which you had handed down to you, you nullify the Word of God! And you do other things like this.***

Mark 7:13-18 almost precisely mirrors Matthew 15:16-20. However it is the final words of Mark 7 verse **19** where the crux of the modern day Christian controversy erupts because those words, and that thought, doesn't appear in Matthew's Gospel or in any other place in the New Testament. The words are: "Thus He (Christ) declared all foods ritually clean". We'll circle back to this statement, but what has to be noted is this: assuming those words were actually penned by Mark, they were Mark's editorial comment... they were not Christ's words (nor were they purported to be). That is, those words represent a conclusion... or perhaps an assumption... reached either by Mark or more likely by a later Christian editor (which is a widely held suspicion among Bible scholars because the comment seems out of place). In literature, ancient and modern, such a thing is rather common and is called a gloss.

Yeshua's explanation to Peter and to the rest of the disciples was to try to reason with them using what we might call common sense, so He uses a universally understood metaphor. He says, look, whatever you put in your mouth (whatever you eat) first goes into your stomach and then later is passed out into a latrine. What Yeshua has said of course wouldn't have been challenged because it was a normal human process of which everyone was aware. So, the premise is that whatever enters into your mouth (what you eat) always has the same result no matter what that food might be, nor what the ritual purity condition of that food might be. The food itself may be ritually clean or ritually unclean, but the bodily process and the end result is always the same.

The next point made is that whether the food is consumed in a ritually clean or unclean state when it enters one's mouth, the final result of it being deposited in a latrine means that either way all food, after it's been eaten and then digested, eventually winds up in an unclean state. And this processing of food through our bodies and then out has no affect on our hearts (our minds). On the other hand,

says Yeshua, what comes **out** of the mouth (that is, our speech... our words) is the far more important issue because it reflects the true condition of our heart (our mind). Stop right here. Notice something interesting: in His explanation of the Parable, Yeshua at first talks about the **physical** bodily process of putting some physical food into our mouth, and then what our physical bodies naturally do with it, just the way God designed us. But He then turns around and switches to speaking of an **invisible** process (words, speech) that does carry enormous spiritual repercussions. That is, what is in our mind (our heart) will reveal itself by what comes out of our mouth, and this is what God uses to judge each of us, personally, as clean or unclean in His eyes.

Understand that especially by Christ's day terms like clean and unclean had evolved a bit in their meaning within Jewish society; and we regularly see the evidence of this in the New Testament. Clean and unclean had, by then, become more broad than technical. As used as a matter of daily conversation... and as we have just read of what Yeshua said using those terms... it often wasn't meant as a precise legal term the way it is used in the Law of Moses. Unclean had become a way of saying that something was no longer desirable; it had been rendered as bad or perhaps as no longer suitable for use by man or God. The person that has an unclean mind will, according to Yeshua, outwardly produce murder, adultery, and other kinds of sexual immorality because our outward physical behavior results from our inward invisible thoughts. So the terms unclean and sin started to become synonyms in Jewish society when used in a general conversational way, even though biblically speaking ritual impurity and sin are two very different things that are treated in different ways.

Again: what was the subject of this entire discourse? Ritual hand washing, as a Tradition of the Elders. So Christ is saying that ritual hand washing has no ability to take unclean food and make it clean, nor could clean food be made ritually unclean if one didn't perform the ritual hand washing before eating. However the nearly universal Christian take on this is that Yeshua sort of changed subjects or melded 2 subjects into 1: ritual hand washing and kosher eating. Thus the Church doctrine is that Yeshua abolished the food laws as contained in the Law of Moses. Yet if one is certain that this is what Christ did (according to what we read in Mark), how can anyone also take seriously what we read in Matthew 5:17-20, that takes place during Christ's Sermon on the Mount?

CJB **Matthew 5:17-20** <sup>17</sup> *"Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.* <sup>18</sup> *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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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!*

It doesn't matter which Bible version one chooses, or which ancient Greek manuscript is used for translation to English, the words of this passage remain consistently the same. Jesus doesn't make the principle briefly so that it can be allegorized away. Rather He goes to some length and detail, making the same point in several ways, to emphasize that no matter how anyone might choose to spin it, He not only did **not** abolish the Torah and the Prophets (together what we today would call the Old Testament) but also not even the tiniest detail of the Torah would be dropped or changed until the current Universe and Earth no longer exist. So it just doesn't hang together scripturally that Christ could make this strong statement in the Sermon on the Mount supporting every aspect of the Torah and the Law of Moses, and then turn around later and schizophrenically abolish the Torah food laws, which are central to it. But also notice one other thing that I've already pointed out. The statement that He did **not** abolish the Torah or any part of is a quote from Christ's own mouth. The statement in the Book of Mark about Christ declaring all foods ritually clean did NOT come from Christ; rather those words were an editorial assumption coming from the mind of Mark or from some later Christian editor who added those words to the verse.

I'll take that one step farther. Those words in Mark form the entire basis of a **Christian** Tradition of the Elders (a manmade Church doctrine that has been handed down) that declares that kosher eating has been abolished. This is then further expanded by the Church to say that if the food laws have been abolished, then this is the needed proof that the entire Law of Moses has also been abolished even though this seems to thoroughly contradict the words from the mouth of God on Earth: Jesus. This is precisely the same issue that Yeshua is battling with the Pharisees and the Scribes. They are advocating for their Jewish Tradition of the Elders (a manmade Synagogue doctrine) about ritual hand washing that according to Yeshua thoroughly contradicts the words of God.

Why am I so confident about what I'm telling you today in the face of centuries of

Church doctrines to the contrary? And that this passage is about one thing only: a tradition of ritual hand washing? It's because the final verse of the passage confirms it.

**CJB Matthew 15:20 <sup>20</sup> *These are what really make a person unclean, but eating without doing n'tilat-yadayim does not make a person unclean.***

The final thought about this episode with the Synagogue leaders and ritual hand washing confirm that Yeshua did not create some new sweeping rule or Law of Jesus to replace the Law of Moses. He didn't make an eleventh commandment or reduce the number to nine. He didn't institute any changes to the Torah. Rather He's attacking those particular Jewish Traditions that either contradict the Word of God (the written Torah) or twist the intended meaning of God's laws and commands to suit human purposes.

Let's move on to the next part of Matthew 15.

### **RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 15:21 - 28**

This is another story that creates some doctrinal problems within Christianity, and challenging these doctrines is long overdue. It centers around the fulcrum of this portion of the chapter, which is verse 24.

**CJB Matthew 15:24 <sup>24</sup> *He (Christ) said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Isra'el."***

The story begins with Jesus leaving His encounter with the hostile Jewish Synagogue leadership and heading north or northwest to what is called Tyre and Sidon. Some Bible commentators say that Yeshua was fleeing the area for His own safety. Although He might have been doing that, nothing in the written words implies it. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century the territories of Tyre and Sidon bordered on the Mediterranean Sea to the west but also extended well eastward, inland into the interior of the upper Galilee, and to the north as far as Damascus. So it likely was not that Yeshua ventured into what was considered as the foreign cities of Tyre and Sidon but rather He went somewhere within their recognized territorial areas that wasn't very far from where He had been.

This likelihood explains why a gentile woman from Canaan (that is, she was descended from Canaanites) would even think to approach the Jew, Jesus, for

exorcism for her daughter and then to address Him as Son of David. I must say that it is rather strange to see the ancient term "Canaan" pop up here. Canaan or Canaanite is an early Old Testament designation that is probably intended by Matthew to remind his Jewish readers of the animosity between ancient Israel and her gentile enemies. It may have been that Matthew used the term Canaan to sort of heighten the tension of the story about Christ and this heathen woman who approaches Him; otherwise it's hard to imagine why it appears.

Nonetheless the next thing for us to ponder in this story is why she would think to call Yeshua the Son of David (a term only known and used within the Jewish religion and culture) or think to approach Him for healing. Actually I don't think the solution is all that difficult. First, Yeshua was by now known far and wide in the region for His healing miracles and exorcisms. While it is true that as a **Tzadik** Yeshua was a miracle healer within the context of the cultural customs and social confines of Jews, where this woman lived no doubt was within a population mix of Jews, gentiles, and some members of the 10 Israelite tribes that had been exiled many centuries earlier. So His accomplishments and His identity would not have been unknown or not understood to her. The folks in this region were quite familiar with each other's cultures due to a long term history of interaction, and an enormous amount of family intermixing that had occurred over the centuries.

Next; this is not the first time that we have heard of someone yelling "Son of David!" at Yeshua. We explored the probable meaning of this uniquely Jewish label in earlier lessons but very briefly it did NOT have, and could not have had, the meaning of Savior as is often claimed in Christian circles. I've shown you in numerous lessons that as of this point in Jesus's ministry He had not revealed that He was Israel's Messiah and there seemed to be no inkling among the thousands of Jews He encountered or even among His own disciples of His true identity and purpose. So to take the expression "Son of David" as meaning "Messiah" to this gentile woman (or to anyone else up to now) has no basis in historical or biblical record. Rather it was that the label Son of David was meant literally; it was referring to Solomon, David's firstborn. It was Jewish Tradition (a myth, really) that Solomon was a miracle healer and an exorcist par excellence as well as the supreme fount of Wisdom; all of these were traits they saw displayed in Yeshua and so wondered if the spirit of Solomon was alive within this carpenter from Nazareth.

Verses 22 and 23 say that Jesus completely ignored the pleas of this desperate

gentile woman for Him to help her precious daughter be rid of demon possession. Even His disciples found her as not worthy of their or His attention. Why? Because as Yeshua responds: He came only for the lost sheep of the House of Israel. My goodness! How are we to understand this? Was He quite forcefully rejecting this woman only because she was **not** Jewish? Indeed it begins by acknowledging a distinct and unmistakable Jew versus gentile hostility present here that had existed for centuries. It also speaks of the cultural mindset of Jewish exceptionalism. Let me say this another way: Jesus's Jewishness and His mission exclusively to His fellow Jews (including the 10 lost tribes of Israel) is front and center. There is simply no way to dismiss it or to spiritualize it away. The ICC commentary on Matthew acknowledges this fact and puts it this way: **"Jesus declares unequivocally the absolute priority of Israel for His mission..."**

No, says institutional Christianity, Jesus didn't mean what He said. Rather He meant He only came FIRST to the Jews... not ONLY to the Jews. Every version of the Greek New Testament ever found, and every credible version of the English translation of this verse, comes to the same conclusion; the word is ONLY and not FIRST. After all, says Christianity, we all know that Jesus was all about gentile priority as the replacement of the Jewish. And herein lies the rub. Once again, as Yeshua said in our previous story, religious Tradition (doctrine) should never trump God's Word. The Church uses that principle only to disparage Jewish use of Jewish Tradition but not Christian use of Christian Tradition. It is the classic religious hypocrisy of the pot calling the kettle black. We can do it because God has elevated us, but you can't do it because God no longer loves you.

We do have to be careful in the Bible to take a verse in isolation. When a half-dozen words are spoken about a subject, and especially when it seems it is laying down a new God-principle, and then we never find it spoken of again in the Scriptures, it is right to be cautious and take it with a grain of salt. For instance, as we discussed in Mark 7:19 when we find the words (in brackets, no less) that says that Christ declared all foods as ritually clean, we find this sentiment in no other place in the New Testament (but even more it runs completely counter to everything else Yeshua said on the subject of the laws of Moses). So do we find the concept of Jewish priority for Yeshua somewhere else?

CJB **Matthew 10:5-6** <sup>5</sup> ***These twelve Yeshua sent out with the following instructions: "Don't go into the territory of the Goyim (gentiles), and don't***



***enter any town in Shomron, <sup>6</sup> but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Isra'el.***

So the principle is firmly established. Not only the disciples, but Yeshua Himself, has as the mission to take the message of the Good News exclusively to the House of Israel and NOT to gentiles. I'll have more to say about this, but first: the gentile woman doesn't take Christ's stone silence to her as the final word. She falls at His feet and says (according to the CJB) "Sir, help me". Many other Bible versions say "Lord, help me". Aha! says Christianity. Calling Jesus "Lord" spiritualizes everything that is happening and so means she somehow knows He is God incarnate and the Messiah when nobody else seems to. Not so fast. The Greek word is ***kurios*** and it is a generic word of respect used mostly in secular circles. It speaks of any kind of master or a person of authority. "Sir" is a very good English translation for understanding the tone and tenor of the meaning for we 21<sup>st</sup> century Christ followers. There is nothing wrong with using the term "lord" as we find it in the KJV, for instance, because "lord" as it was used in the KJV era is the equivalent of "sir" today. There was no built-in religious concept to it at all; a concept that Christianity assigns to the term "lord" everywhere it is found in the Bible. The woman was in no way meaning that Yeshua was God or Savior. Rather, she was merely showing Him proper respect as He was a well known leader of a substantial flock of followers. And, as we all know, when we are requesting something from someone that is reluctant to give it to us, it is better to show extra respect in hopes of softening him or her up.

To make this story even more difficult for Christians to take, when the woman continues her plea for help, Christ responds: ***"It is not right to take the children's food and toss it to their pet dogs."*** The early Church Father Chrysostom says about this scene: ***"The more urgent she makes her entreaty, so the more does He also urge His denial"***. Yeshua's response sounds almost cruel to a Christian. How can Christ turn His back on her predicament, even put her down for not being a Jew, if He is such a loving Savior? Looking at His reply, Israel represents the children, the children's food represents all the benefits Yeshua brings to them, and the dogs represent all non-Jews. Once again we find Jewish priority. Interestingly, Mark has a bit different approach to Yeshua's response. His Gospel says:

<sup>CJB</sup> ***Mark 7:27 He said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's food and toss it to their pet dogs."***

So while Matthew has Christ speaking in terms of not only priority but also exclusivity in favor of the Jews, Mark softens it only to Jewish priority. That is, there is a sliver of an opening for gentiles to be included, but nonetheless Jews are the primary aim. There is no better time than now to discuss what this means for Jews and gentiles as far as our places in a divine pecking order (if there is one) and what it means within mainstream Christianity that essentially turns what we read in the New Testament in this regard on its head.

Since the Church long ago veered away from being a body that is predicated on Christ's teachings and relies more on the words of the Apostle Paul, nonetheless Paul expresses this same principle of Jewish priority, but not Jewish exclusivity, in one of his more famous dissertations in Romans 11. Open your Bibles to Romans chapter 11.

### **READ ROMANS CHAPTER 11:13 - 27**

I have referred you to Romans 11 only to make the point that gentile inclusion, but Jewish priority, was thoroughly understood by Paul (you can go to my commentary on Romans at the TorahClass.com website for a more detailed study of this chapter). Paul used the metaphor of a wild olive tree being grafted into a cultivated olive tree in the same way and meaning that Christ used the metaphor of the children's food being tossed to dogs. We can equate the children's food with the cultivated olive tree, and the dogs with the wild olive tree. The idea is that the food BELONGS to and was intended for the children, and not the dogs, in the same way that the cultivated olive tree BELONGS in the orchard and was intended for the orchard's cultivator, but the wild olive does not. Yet, as the woman says in Matthew 15:27:

***<sup>27</sup> She said, "That is true, sir, but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their master's table."***

In other words, the woman acknowledges the priority of the children and their food, but says that the dogs can also be included and benefit (albeit, it is the leftovers). Just as Paul acknowledges that the cultivated olive tree is the one that has the priority and has been given special care and is supported by its rich roots, even so a wild olive can be grafted onto the cultivated olive tree and receive the same nourishment (the same blessings). The cultivated olive is the House of Israel, and the wild olive represents gentiles.

Yet what we find is that early on the institutional Church reversed the priority. They say that the children have become gentiles, and the dogs have become Israel. And that the cultivated olive tree has become the gentiles, while the wild olive has become Israel. This doctrine has many names, one of which is Replacement Theology (gentile Christians have replaced Israel and thus now hold the priority before God). I could spend a lot more time discrediting what is, sadly, a faith principle upon which the bulk of Western and Eastern Christianity stands. But if you have the ears to hear, and are willing to take God's Word as the priority over manmade doctrines, then I think what I've already said is sufficient and we'll move on.

Yeshua was startled by the woman's response to Him. She may have been insulted by Yeshua classifying her gentile status as that of dogs, but she refused to let it deter her. She knew that this Jewish Holy Man was her only hope to heal her daughter of being possessed by evil spirits. So she submitted to Christ's categorization of her but at the same time asked for just the crumbs of Yeshua's mission and abilities and thought those sufficient to heal her daughter. Her faith and her humility brought out Christ's compassion to detour, just for a moment, from His purpose and priority and so He healed the little girl without her even being in His presence.

We must not overlook something important that would not have been on the fringes of this story when a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew read this, but it is to modern Believers. It is that the one making the appeal to Jesus was a woman. It is difficult in the West to understand the male-dominant society of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Women, in Jewish culture, were not chattel but they were seen as having lesser value than men. That is not what God says, but it is the ubiquitous Middle Eastern cultural tradition of that era that prevails to this very day. On top of that, this is a non-Jewish woman and this is one reason that Yeshua's disciples had virtually no regard for her at all. There are only 2 non-Jewish women in the New Testament who are said to have great faith, and this woman is one of them.

Yeshua in no way changed His mind about His mission or His priority to bring the Good News to the House of Israel, and we'll see this fact played out through the rest of His life, His death and resurrection, and even post-resurrection actions. What we ought to take away from this story (besides the priority of Israel to Jesus) is that great faith in Yeshua by any person of any background will bring acceptance and the greatest of benefits. And still, for the sake of intellectual honesty, I must point out that the faith this woman had was not that Yeshua was

God and Savior, but rather that He was a unique miracle healer. And as a gentile she wasn't particular where the needed healing came from (even from a Jew); she was simply glad to receive it.

I ask you all to join me in battling to restore the truth that we have been studying today. I am sorry to say that the gentile arrogance so dominant within the Christian Church has resulted in a type of Christianity that would bring nothing but reprimand if our Savior, Yeshua, stood in person among us today. It is hard to overstate how a false fundamental faith principle that puts gentiles above Jews (Israel), and relegating Israel to disinheritance, taints a broad spectrum of Church doctrines. It is also why so many Believers who have come to recognize this heresy struggle to apply a simple label to identify who we are. "Christian" has come to mean a host of things, many of which run counter to the teaching of Yeshua and all the Bible and therefore many Believers understandably want to shun that label. I implore you to pray that God will restore the congregation of Christ to devote ourselves to the goal that Yeshua left us with as He moved into Heaven waiting for the moment the Father will send Him back for us.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Acts 1:6-9** <sup>6</sup> *When they were together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore self-rule to Isra'el?"* <sup>7</sup> *He answered, "You don't need to know the dates or the times; the Father has kept these under his own authority."* <sup>8</sup> *But you will receive power when the Ruach HaKodesh comes upon you; you will be my witnesses both in Yerushalayim and in all Y'hudah and Shomron, indeed to the ends of the earth!"* <sup>9</sup> *After saying this, he was taken up before their eyes; and a cloud hid him from their sight.*

We'll continue in Matthew 15 next week.