

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 55, Chapter 15 Conclusion

Before we continue in Matthew 15 today there's a couple of housekeeping issues I would like to get out of the way because I am regularly asked about it and enjoy the opportunity to offer an explanation. The first is my characterization over these past many years of something called "The Church", and second is my less than flattering view that all too often Bible scholars overreach by either trying to forensically examine the minds of Bible characters or authors of the Bible books who lived 2000 years ago and more, or they at times dismiss things clearly written in the Word because they cannot bring themselves to accept those things at face value as accurate or true.

First, The Church. One of the most difficult but common things that humans deal with is labels. The term "The Church" is one such label. That is, we tend to define people, institutions, historical events, and dozens of other things with very abbreviated words that we call labels, assuming that someone else will understand what that label means when we say it or write it or that there is only one understood definition of that label. Depending on one's viewpoint, this is either a lazy or an expedient method of communication (the truth of it probably lies somewhere in the middle). As an example; in the political world if we say Liberal or Conservative, those are labels that were created, which seek to lump together a complex and rather long listing of political philosophies and preferences concerning many social and government issues. But I think I can say without hesitation that what the detailed description about the simple labels Liberal and Conservative mean to one, doesn't always mean the same to another. So the convenience of describing broad swaths of people with a one word label serves a useful purpose for politicians, but it is hardly intellectually honest. So it is with the term "The Church". If I called upon several of you,

privately and separately, to define "The Church" I promise you I'd get a wide variation of responses. That would doubly be the case if I then reached out to several established denominations. So I want to tell you what I mean to communicate when I use that term, and also to explain that it's organically connected to the term "Christian".

A thing called "The Church" does not exist in the New Testament but it is read backwards into it in order to serve a purpose. Rather the term we find is, in Greek, **ekklesia**. It is a rather broad term that means assembly or congregation. Even in English the term church is somewhat broad and can mean a number of different things. In the Webster Dictionary "church" is defined as a building where a group of Christians meet. Or it can also refer to a group of religious people of most any belief system (for instance we've all heard of the church of Satan). Used in another way it can mean a public worship service. In other circles is used to mean the official governing body of a denomination of Christians. And yet in another sense it is a label to describe the entire body of all Christians taken as a whole. When I use the term I nearly always mean it as the entire body of all Christians taken as a whole, but sometimes I'll add the word "institutional" before the word "Church" as then referring to the governing body of a denomination or of denominations in general. But I want to take this another step further.

Without doubt "The Church", as a label, refers to the body of GENTILE Christians practicing a GENTILE created religion of one sort or another. The Church generally does not recognize Messianic Judaism as being part of The Church. Jewish involvement is rather rare at The Church congregation level and unheard of in Church government. Such a thing was not contemplated and did not exist in the New Testament where we predominately find Jews as the leadership of followers of Christ. Whether it is the Eastern Christian Church branch (such as the Greek Orthodox and the Coptic) or the Western Christian Church branch (consisting primarily of Catholic and Protestant) this same label and attributes of "The Church" applies. Thus, those who consider themselves as members of the Eastern or Western Church branches are gentiles that label themselves as Christians, regardless of the widely varying (and even opposing) doctrines and practices.

Taken as a whole The Church has (since no later than around the 3rd century) shunned it's exclusively Hebrew foundation as laid out in the Bible, and gone so far as to disavow entire sections of the Bible and many of its commands in order to distance itself from the Hebrew people. The Church intentionally made it

impossible for Jews to be part of it, and there have been times that Jews were murdered by the hundreds for having tried to become a part of it. The Church abolished nearly all biblical practices that were central to Hebrew religious society (based on the Laws of Moses) and invented new and replacement practices and celebrations that were acceptable to the pagan gentile religions that ruled the day. Naturally, since The Church is so large and exists in every corner of the world what I have said to you about it is a broad generalization; but generalization that is full of exceptions is the inherent nature of any label used for any purpose.

Therefore because the underlying, nearly universal, understanding of the meaning of the term "The Church" is as I just described, I must view it in a less than favorable light because it does not accurately reflect the religion, beliefs, and practices of Our Savior Yeshua in particular nor of the Holy Scriptures in general. A second and associated label, "Christian", carries with it the same burden. Christian is a label for a person that is first, a gentile, and second, a member of The Church. The third meaning is a follower of Christ. However as the centuries have gone by, the formerly automatic meaning of being a member of The Church and of being a Christ follower in any kind of real sense has waned. Yet even for the mainstream of members of The Church, the following of Christ is less based on a historical Jesus, and instead based on a contrived version that has re-imagined Him as a gentile or perhaps as a universal or generic man. Further the supposed following of Him is based less on what Jesus said and more on what Paul said, and both of them had their words twisted and reformulated to fit a pre-determined agenda or have been interpreted outside their authentic Jewish 1st century context, which is the only legitimate and intellectually honest context that can be considered.

The bottom line is that for myself (and I know for many of you) should I call myself a Christian I mean it only in the most limited sense: I, and you, are followers of the historical Yeshua, in His Jewish context, as the divine Lord and Savior, and as defined by the Bible and NOT as defined by The Church.

Now as concerns the issue of Bible scholars. While before about 200 years ago it was unthinkable that a Bible scholar would be anything but a learned Jew who believed in the God of Israel or a gentile Believer in Christ, that has changed. It would be impossible to give you a percentage, however my best guess based on anecdotal evidence is that of modern Bible scholars (that is, 20th and 21st century Bible scholars) perhaps a third or more not only don't believe in Jesus, they don't

believe in God. It's only that the Bible is their chosen field of academic study, just as medicine or archeology might be for others. This is why most Universities that offer Christian study include it within the Philosophy Department. So while such scholars can be quite astute at translation of the original languages and at ancient history, this unbelieving portion of Bible scholars has a tendency to think that they can not only get into the minds of these 1st century biblical writers and explain the motives for why they wrote what they did (in other words, heavenly inspiration played no part in what they wrote), but also that these writers were often wrong or intentionally created legend and myth to captivate a hoped-for audience. Needless to say I have a less than favorable view of some of their conclusions about the meaning of biblical passages even if they can at times offer some profound insight into the meaning of the original language words used in the ancient texts, and in providing some historical contextual background.

Thus when you detect a somewhat negative tone from me towards the generally accepted mental vision of the label "The Church", and a skepticism towards the conclusions put forward by some of the noted Bible scholars whom I know to be non-Believers, that's exactly what I intend. I'll say one last time: I completely acknowledge that there are exceptions to the rule even though the definitions of the labels The Church and Christian I have put forward are accurate. And that the bulk of Bible scholars are excellent, well studied and ARE Believers. So my intent is not to offend but to challenge long held, but dubious, beliefs, customs, and doctrines some of which are very harmful to our relationship with God because they are not the truth. Let's move on.

When we left off last week it was with Yeshua being confronted by a gentile woman who wanted Him to vanquish a demon that was possessing her daughter. At first He simply ignored her as if she were invisible. He eventually did speak to her at the urging of His disciples but only to tell this gentile woman in the strongest terms that He didn't come for people like her...gentiles... but only "for the lost sheep of the house of Israel". She wouldn't take "no" for an answer and kept after Him. So He next responded with an insult. He told her that the food for the children (a metaphor for Israel) ought not be given to the dogs (an offensive metaphor for gentiles). The woman brushed aside the insult and countered that even the dogs get some of what the children get in the form of crumbs of their food that fall off the table because the dogs are there to lap them up. Yeshua was so impressed by this pagan woman agreeing that 1) He was indeed sent not for gentiles but only for Hebrews, and 2) for accepting where gentiles fit in His mission and pecking order, and 3) that she was persistent in firmly believing that

He could exorcise a demon from her daughter, that He complied. The story ends abruptly with Jesus leaving the area where He was (somewhere north of the Galilee) and returning to His current area of residence near The Lake.

Let's pick up by re-reading a portion of Matthew chapter 15.

RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 15:29 - end

What we have just read is disputed by the preponderance of modern Bible scholars. The reason is that this group sees the recording of a second miraculous feeding of several thousand people as unnecessary and redundant, and therefore it is simply Mathew's mistake. That is, he has accidentally (due to bad information, or perhaps due to 2 different traditions that were in circulation about Jesus feeding a crowd of people) created two separate instances of Yeshua feeding a large group when in fact there was only one. This is one of the reasons for my introduction today. Notice that these particular scholars that are firmly convinced of a Scriptural error rely only upon their opinions but with no biblical or historical evidence to back it up. But since such an expert opinion has become so shared and accepted on a widespread basis within modern Bible academia, it now passes as fact.

However in opposition to this widely held opinion, there was very good reason for Yeshua's second feeding of the crowds by means of a miraculous multiplication of food; it was a lesson in hopes of teaching the disciples something they clearly didn't receive the first time. We read in Mark that even after the obvious miracle of multiplying 5 loaves and 2 fishes into enough to feed around 10,000 people, and the equally obvious lesson that Yeshua was using to show the disciples that they were the ones to facilitate the feeding of these "lost sheep of the house of Israel", the disciples still didn't get it.

When after the first incident of feeding so many with so little the disciples got into a boat on the Sea of Galilee and began rowing towards home, a storm suddenly blew up. Yeshua senses the danger they are in and went walking on the water to calm the disciples and the turbulent waters, and to give them yet another demonstration of who He was in reality because in the Bible, and in Hebrew Tradition, only God could walk on water. Mark in commentating in his Gospel on the reaction of the stupefied and soaked disciples to what just transpired said this:

CJB Mark 6:51-52 ⁵¹ He got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. They were completely astounded, ⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves; on the contrary, their hearts had been made stone-like.

Notice that Mark blames their being so unprepared to accept Jesus calming the storm and walking on the waves is because even after participating in the miracle of "the loaves", their hearts (their minds) were hardened. That is, they remained hard headed towards the divine identity of Christ (they were still held hostage by their Traditions). So what we learn is that the first feeding of the multitudes did not have the desired effect on the disciples that Yeshua had hoped. Thus, a very good reason to do it all again (as Matthew and Mark record) is to perhaps try to achieve a better outcome this next time, especially after the walking-on-water incident may have finally been the demonstration they needed in order for them to understand the nature of who their Master was.

Then of course there's this: Yeshua Himself says there were 2 separate feeding events. In the next chapter of Matthew (16) we read:

CJB Matthew 16:8-10 ⁸ But Yeshua, aware of this, said, "Such little trust you have! Why are you talking with each other about not having bread? ⁹ Don't you understand yet? Don't you remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you filled? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many baskets you filled?"

This new story begins with Yeshua climbing up a hill and sitting down. Immediately a huge crowd begins to gather. I cannot proceed without noting that some commentators see this scene of Yeshua climbing a hill to speak and heal (something He's done before) as Christ acting out something that will come to pass in the End Times; something prophesied by the Old Testament Prophets...healing all people and doing it on a mass scale. A second is that other commentators see His act of feeding the thousands as pointing forward to the Eucharist: the establishment of the sacrament of Communion (the first of which is the eating of bread and drinking of wine at Yeshua's final Passover on the eve before He is executed). I cannot say with certainty that these meanings and symbolism are not so. However, I am skeptical and see these commentators' beliefs more likely as based on later Christian traditions and denominational doctrines being read backward into the story. The most cited reason for seeing Christ's actions of going up on a hill and healing myriads of people as a symbol of later fulfillment of End Times prophecy is found in Isaiah 2:1 - 3.

^{CJB} **Isaiah 2:1** *This is the word that Yesha'yahu the son of Amotz saw concerning Y'hudah and Yerushalayim: ² In the acharit-hayamim the mountain of ADONAI's house will be established as the most important mountain. It will be regarded more highly than the other hills, and all the Goyim will stream there. ³ Many peoples will go and say, "Come, let's go up to the mountain of ADONAI, to the house of the God of Ya'akov! He will teach us about his ways, and we will walk in his paths." For out of Tziyon will go forth Torah, the word of ADONAI from Yerushalayim.*

So the belief of some Bible commentators is that this passage in Isaiah directly correlates to Yeshua's actions at the Sea of Galilee because He walked up a hill and then healed people. While that is a lovely thought, and not out of the question, yet when we compare the two passages we see that about the only commonality between them is the mention of a hill. In Isaiah, on top of the hill (or mountain) will be God's house (the Temple). The Temple is not present in Matthew except if we spiritualize rather extensively and call Yeshua the Temple. In Isaiah there is no healing, but that is what occurs in Matthew. In Isaiah it is the Word of God going forth; that is not what happens in Matthew. In Isaiah it is gentiles streaming to the Temple. In Matthew there is no mention of gentiles (even though we can assume there must have been a few scattered among the large crowd of Jews). However because The Church is exclusively gentile oriented then the thought is to replace the Jews that stand before Jesus in our Matthew scene with the gentiles of Isaiah.

As for the Matthew event of feeding the crowds as a foretaste of the creation of the Eucharist: first of all, the Eucharist is a Roman church created sacrament that is about the taking of Communion. Second, the event that spawned the Christian tradition of Communion was the breaking of bread and drinking of wine at Passover, in Jerusalem. Third, the Matthew narrative of the feeding of the thousands involved bread and fish, not bread and wine and there is no mention of Yeshua connecting the multiplication of the fishes and the loaves with the partaking of His own body. So without further evidence I cannot connect Yeshua sitting on a hill and feeding and healing people with the End Times events of Isaiah 2 or with Communion.

So Yeshua is sitting on a hill and the crowds are gathering; but for what purpose? The same it has been throughout Matthew's Gospel account, to this point in Christ's ministry. They are coming to be healed. They are coming to the **Tzadik**, the Jewish miracle-working Holy Man. There is no thought that they are coming

with a view of Jesus as the Messiah. They are coming for practical reasons; they have illnesses, lameness, blindness and other infirmities for which only a divine miracle is the solution. One might say that because they looked to a Holy Man and His connection to God that it was for spiritual reasons that they came, but that would be overlooking that in their era there was no separation or compartmentalization between every day life and the spiritual. It is to our modern detriment that we do make this distinction, for such separation is the opposite of what God teaches us in His Word. Our everyday lives and our spiritual lives are one in the same in His eyes.

Jesus heals all who are brought before Him and the people continue to be amazed not just at His ability to do miracles but at the huge volume of miracles that He performed, with never a failure. In verse 31 we're told that the reaction of the people was that they said a **b'rakhah** to the God of Israel (that is, they said a blessing to God). While we find those words in the CJB in almost all other translations we have "and they glorified the God of Israel". There's a couple of things to be gleaned from this. First, only Jews would have glorified or said a **b'rakhah** to the God of Israel. Gentiles practiced pagan religions and certainly would have praised their god or gods, and not Israel's God; so these healings were of Jews. There is nothing wrong with using the term "glorified" to explain the Jews' reaction. However that is such a broad term because one has to ask how a Jew might glorify God? The way Jews in that era glorified God was by saying a blessing to Him. So both translations are correct, it is only that one is more specific than the other. And what a lesson for us. So the second take-way is one that may seem obvious but is too often over looked. When we are healed or rescued from a bad situation, the proper response of any Believer is to immediately glorify God... not any god... but only the God of the Bible... The God of Israel. That is how we credit Him and thank Him.

The next verse says that Jesus called His disciples to Him and said that He felt sorry for these people because they had been there for 3 days and now have nothing to eat. He was afraid they would collapse from hunger on their journeys home. So He asked the disciples how much food they had with them. They replied that they had a few fish and 7 loaves of bread. So let's set the scene. Whereas in the first occasion of feeding the crowds they were there for one day, and it was becoming evening and it was time for the people to eat supper, here in the second occasion the healing session had gone on for 3 days and we don't know the time of day when this concern about food arose. Even if the people had come somewhat prepared with their own food, clearly most of them never

anticipated being there for 3 days! But how important this event was for them. Being in Yeshua's presence, even if it was only for what He could do for them that no one else could, was worth whatever discomforts and hunger they might face. This was the opportunity of a lifetime; one they may or may not ever have again.

Is there significance in the 3 days (that is, the number 3)? Possibly; but I doubt it because if the reference is to Yeshua's coming execution, burial and resting in the tomb the expression is 3 days and 3 nights (the sign of Jonah), not what I see as merely a statement of fact that the healing sessions went on for 3 days, with that length of time helping us to understand Christ's concerns over the need of food for the people before they leave. I'll highlight yet again the Bible's concern over food. Food is always front and center and very much so with Yeshua. It goes well beyond merely a hunger issue or a health issue; it is indeed also an obedience issue and a spiritual issue... if only we'll have the ears to hear. And because food is central to God's Word such that He has set down important principles about it, then it is no wonder that food and feeding is used as a metaphor so often by Jesus and by others in the Bible.

After the meager amount of food is revealed... barely enough for the disciples let alone for the masses before Him... Yeshua instructs that the crowd should sit down. Why tell them to sit? Why would Matthew include this bit of information? Likely because sitting tells the folks that something is coming. It is to create anticipation. It puts them in a position of getting ready to be served. They may not have known exactly why they were to sit but they complied. Yeshua has the 7 loaves and the fishes set before Him, gives thanks to God (the CJB says made a **b'rakhah**), then broke the bread. It is interesting to note that the Greek work used this time in regard to Jesus making the blessing before breaking the bread is **eucharisteo**... sound familiar? Yes; it's where the Roman church got the word Eucharist from. The Greek lexicons explain **eucharisteo** as meaning to give thanks. It is a generic word that can be used in many situations and only has a spiritual connotation if used within that context. Thus because the Church Sacrament of the Eucharist was created long after New Testament times, then we see how a Bible commentator might want us to read back into this story the mention of Jesus giving thanks as a forerunner of the Communion ceremony, simply because the generic Greek word that means to "give thanks" is used. The problem is, such a giving of thanks to God (a specific prayer blessing) was standard when Jews ate and not at all relegated to use at some specific or highly spiritual event.

Next we see happen the same thing that happened at the first feeding of a large crowd. Yeshua delegated to the disciples the job of handing out the bounty He provided. All of them may or may not have finally understood the message; regardless, it is obvious to us. The one Gospel writer that was likely actually there when this happened was John. This might be why of the countless things he could have written about, but only the relatively few that he did, he chose to include this:

^{CJB} **John 21:17** *The third time he said to him, "Shim'on Bar-Yochanan, are you my friend?" Shim'on was hurt that he questioned him a third time: "Are you my friend?" So he replied, "Lord, you know everything! You know I'm your friend!" Yeshua said to him, "Feed my sheep!"*

"Feed my sheep". It is clear from His several case examples and illustrations that Christ expects His disciples to feed His sheep on two levels: physically and spiritually. Christ's followers are to do our best to ensure that those we encounter do not go hungry for food. But also as His followers we are to give out spiritual food... Godly compassion to go along with the teaching of God's Word... to those who are willing to hear it. God provides, we distribute. That's the formula. As Yeshua's disciples it is not a slogan, but rather our responsibility, to feed His sheep.

As with the first feeding occasion, every one in the crowd ate their fill with food leftover. We cannot ignore that the number 7 is used twice in this short story. First as the number of loaves of bread, and finally as the number of baskets of food leftover. It is interesting that in the first story of the miraculous multiplication that the number of baskets filled with leftovers was 12 and the beginning number of loaves was 5, while the number of fish was 2. I explained at that time that while I could not be sure, assuming the numbers 5 and 2 were also symbolic, then perhaps they symbolized the 5 books of Torah with the 2 symbolizing the 2 greatest commandments to love God and love our fellow man. But now that we see the use of 7 in the second episode of feeding a large crowd, when we couple it with the 12 baskets of leftovers of the first story, it is hard to get around not seeing symbolism in those numbers.

Remembering that the Jewish Believer Matthew was writing his Gospel to Jews, the numbers 12 and 7 would have caught their eyes as well known symbolic numbers. In the Bible 12 regularly was used to symbolize the 12 Tribes of Israel. Yeshua has said He came only for the "lost sheep of the house of Israel"

(meaning all 12 tribes). So, after the first feeding there were 12 baskets left over; one for each tribe. Thus Matthew was likely highlighting this inspiring lesson of Yeshua's mission to feed physically and spiritually the entire house of Israel... all 12 tribes.

As for the number 7 in our second story. 7 is the number of divine completion. It represents a fullness, a wholeness. Therefore at times the number 7 is given the label of The Ideal Number. The number 7 is associated with acts of God and of God's will. I cannot imagine that the first Jews who read Matthew's Gospel would not have immediately latched on to this understanding, and we should as well. So in the first feeding the 12 remaining baskets speak of Christ's target audience of the 12 tribes, and in the second feeding 7 speaks of an act of God's will and the wholeness and perfection of it. Would the disciples or the people have understood that at the moment? We're not told. My suspicion is that they would not because too much was happening to stop and think about it. This is why we all need Sabbath (the 7th day) as a time to stop, clear the decks, and have the time and peace to think upon things that go on in our lives; to put them in proper perspective, and to give thanks to God as our provider and the One who is guiding our journey.

Verse 38 says that the number of people who were there, and were fed, were 4,000 men plus women and children. Thus the total number would have been in the range of 8,000 people. Understand that in biblical terminology, Old or New Testaments, any type of counting of people (taking a census) was of males only. This was not to devalue women or children but rather it reflected a male dominated society and the central place of the family unit in those days. A mature male was assumed to have a wife, and then further assumed to have some number of children. The entire economies of ancient times, Jewish and all other, were based on the existence of family units defined as male husband, female wife, and then some healthy number of offspring.

The chapter closes with Yeshua dismissing the crowd, walking down to The Lake, getting into a boat and making His way to Magadan. There are many theories as to the identification of ancient Magadan. The first 10 verses of Mark chapter 8 tell the same story nearly word for word. However when Jesus leaves, Mark lists His destination as a different place than Matthew does.

^{CJB} **Mark 8:10** *After sending them away, Yeshua got into the boat with his talmidim and went off to the district of Dalmanuta.*

It is possible that Magadan and Dalmanuta were two names for the same place; the first the Hebrew name, the second the name the Romans gave it. Or it is that whatever information Matthew and Mark drew upon came from different sources that used different names. Some Bible scholars surmise that Magadan was another name for Magdala, which is itself another name for a town called Migdal. If this is the place it is located a couple of miles south of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, not very far from Tiberias.

This last verse of chapter 15 basically serves to set up what happens next to begin chapter 16. Please keep at the forefront of your minds that no such things as chapter markings for these Gospel accounts (or any biblical account) existed and wouldn't for another millennium after they were written. So we can get the impression of a pause between the final verse of one chapter and the first verse of the next, but that was not the thought of the writer or the structure he wrote it in. Mentally we need to erase those chapter markings to keep the intended flow of thought and words.

Next week we'll be reading Matthew chapter 16.