

## **Matthew 15:(10-20)21-28<sup>iv v</sup>**

[Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?” He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”] Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

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### **<sup>iv</sup> About the Gospel: Matthew 15:(10-20)21-28**

The optional first part of this reading (vv. 10-20) follows a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes over purity practices. The argument began with the religious authorities criticizing Jesus’ disciples for not keeping the custom of ritually cleansing their hands before eating.

In this passage, Jesus discusses dietary laws of the inherited tradition and what constitutes true defilement. For Jesus’ first followers as well as Matthew’s later Jewish audience, this teaching would have reinterpreted familiar purity customs regarding food, putting Jesus at odds with the religious authorities of his day and reflecting tensions between early Jewish- and Gentile-Christian communities over the importance of these observances.

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Jesus concludes this teaching with a vice list, a common technique for moral teaching in the ancient world. But the vices he lists are not only appropriate for a Jewish audience but a Gentile one as well.

Jesus elevates the importance of behavioral standards that transcend Jewish-Gentile differences. In this way, his teaching sets the stage for the story that follows:

Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman (vv. 21-28) foreshadows the offer of salvation beyond Israel to the Gentiles. The center of interest is not the miracle but Jesus' attitude toward Gentiles. A distinction is made between Jesus' mission and his response to individual faith wherever found. Matthew emphasizes for his Jewish Christian audience that God has been faithful to Israel but that Gentile faith cannot be denied.

The incident exemplifies the form of argument that was common in Jesus' day. The argument was carried on by citing proverbs. The person who cited the best proverb was recognized as the winner.

In Matthew's gospel, the focus of Jesus' mission has 'til now been only to Israel (10:5). So when this woman comes and kneels before him requesting help for her daughter, he first refuses her request by appealing to the commonsense wisdom of a proverb: should the children's bread, one of the essentials of life and thus a symbol for salvation (14:15-21) be given to the dogs?

The woman's quick-witted reply exemplifies the kind of verbal acumen admired in the Middle East. She is not satisfied with his reply and responds with another proverb, reinforcing her request by citing a different proverb that re-frames the whole situation: even the puppies get the scraps that are leftovers. Jesus, realizing that in this argument her proverb outdoes his, recognizes her triumph by acclaiming her faith and healing her daughter as she had requested. (Commentary on the optional section of Matthew—vv. 10-20—by Br. Richard Edward Helmer, BSG.)

## ▼ Reflection and Response

Those of us who like our stories about Jesus to be sweet and neat are likely to choke on today's gospel. A Canaanite woman comes to Jesus and begs, "Lord, heal my daughter." And what does Jesus, that gentle Savior, do? First he ignores her. Then he explains that as an

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outcast—“dog” is the word he actually uses—she is not entitled to his services. Finally, he grants her request.

“Maybe he was testing her faith,” suggest some, but this suggestion makes the story even more unpalatable. Are we not supposed to approach Jesus with the trusting confidence of little children? We can imagine how little trust and confidence children would have if their requests were answered by neglect or name-calling.

Perhaps the setting of today’s story can give us another way to understand it. Just before the story of this woman’s request, we find Jesus in heated dispute with his own disciples. The disciples take for granted the system of ritual purity with which they have been raised; Jesus challenges both the disciples and their assumptions. Under this system, Jews are clean; Canaanites are unclean. A person who has touched a dead thing is unclean; a person who has undergone rites of purification is clean.

But Jesus declares that nothing external makes a person clean or unclean; only a pure heart makes us pure. The disciples cannot comprehend what Jesus means. Peter will need still further guidance after Jesus’ death and resurrection before he favors admitting Gentiles into the Christian community.

Perhaps the argument extended to Jesus’ habit of associating with people the disciples considered unclean—tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners. Why did Jesus not understand the importance of limiting his contacts to the righteous?

Shortly after this dispute, the Canaanite woman comes to Jesus. Is the argument with the disciples still on Jesus’ mind? Does he confront his disciples with their own rigidity as he acts according to their notions of ritual purity? For indeed, a Jewish man was not supposed to talk to a foreign woman.

You can almost see the disciples’ embarrassment as they urge, “Lord, do something! She is making a scene!” Note that the disciples do not urge Jesus to give her what she wants. They only want him to get rid of this troublesome woman.

“Oh, no,” says Jesus. “I am sent only to the Jews, right? I am not supposed to associate with these others!” Does even the epithet “dog” echo the disciples’ unspoken thoughts and attitudes?

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The story is no easier to swallow. Jesus is not gentle here, either to the disciples or the woman herself. But he makes clear where his own heart lies when he turns to the woman, honors her faith, and grants her request.

Now we, of course, have no problem with Canaanite women. But if we think we know no outcasts, we have not listened closely to the homeless, to the terminally ill, or to people of every class, color, and sexual preference who have found themselves shut out from everyday life by those whose circumstances and choices were different. See, they follow us and they will not be hushed. We may plead, “Lord, do something,” but Jesus turns in silence to us. What will we do?

Quietly consider: How have my attitudes and prejudices limited how and where God’s saving actions could take place?