

The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Fifteen

IX Matthew 13:54-16:20 - The Identity of the Messiah Revealed (continues)

Summary of Chapter Fifteen

Jesus was once again in dispute with the religious leaders. On this occasion some of the senior figures had travelled up from Jerusalem and had noted that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before eating. They saw this as a transgression of their traditions, which for them had become the law, and because of this, Jesus countered their claims from Scripture to show they had become erroneous teachers of the true law of God, breaking the law by upholding their traditions.

Jesus then taught the people that everything God has not instituted will be removed. He also indicated that it was not personal hygiene or what a person ate that would make them clean or unclean; God wanted them to have pure hearts, thoughts, words and actions.

Jesus then travelled to the region of Tyre and Sidon, where he had an encounter with a Canaanite woman, who showed remarkable faith and persistence in seeking Jesus' help to heal her spirit possessed daughter. Due to her remarkable faith and humility Jesus complied with her request.

On his return to Galilee, Jesus was once again met by a crowd as he settled down on a mountain to teach. The crowd had brought many sick and disabled people with them, whom Jesus healed due to his compassion for them all.

After three days the crowd had no food remaining and, fearing for their welfare if they tried to travel home in such a condition, Jesus produced another food multiplication miracle, this time feeding four thousand from seven loaves and a few fish. He then sailed to the region of Magadan, possibly Magdala.

IX.d Matthew 15:1-39 -
Teacher of the Word of God and compassionate healer

Contrary to the traditions of the Jewish elders (vv.1-9), Jesus teaches on the purity and impurity of the heart, showing himself to be the true teacher of God's Word (vv.10-20), and the compassionate healer and provider for all people (vv.21-39).

IX.d.i Matthew 15:1-9 - The Tradition of the Elders

Following the rescue of his people from Egyptian slavery and before they took possession of the Promised Land, God had provided them with a set of instructions that would allow them to live a life that was honouring to him and would keep them safe from the sinful lures of the world around them. This was intended to make them a beacon for God to the Gentiles in the surrounding regions.

However, the Jews themselves failed to keep the laws and eventually found themselves exiled from the land. When a remnant returned, many of the more zealous started to interpret the laws in a stricter human fashion that had become a burden to the people and was actually moving away from what God actually wanted for his people. Yet generation after generation, these traditions were imposed on the Jewish people and indeed the rules tightened with each passing generation. Thus Jesus had already reached out to his people: <<*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*>> (Matthew 11:29-30); unlike the burden of the traditions.

Jesus here speaks out strongly against the folly of those leaders who followed the traditions of the elders rather than teaching the Scriptures, which would be the right way of honouring God. Had they indeed understood and taught the Word of God, they would have recognised Jesus as their long promised Messiah.

¹ Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,

Matthew 15:1

From Jerusalem. The highest-ranking Pharisees and scribes tended to reside near to the temple and here they had travelled to Galilee in order to confront Jesus. The confrontation this would lead to is recounted in greater detail in Mark 7:1-23.

The Pharisees and scribes did not possess the same level of political power, for that was in the hands of the Sadducean majority in the Sanhedrin, but they were highly respected and held more influence over the ordinary people with regard to applying the laws and traditions to their daily lives.

² 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.'

Matthew 15:2

Why do your disciples break the tradition. Once again they object to a practice of Jesus' disciples, implying a deficiency in the training Jesus has given them

Tradition of the elders refers to interpretations of Scripture that had been handed down from esteemed rabbis from generation to generation, often being modified and updated to meet the needs of changing times and circumstances. The religious

elite insist that their way is right, even though it is based only on tradition. Paul, once a strict Pharisee, would come to disagree with them: <<'All things are lawful for me', but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me', but I will not be dominated by anything>> (1 Corinthians 6:12). He recognised the freedom that Jesus offered him and all others; freedom to serve God alone.

They do not wash their hands. Priests were required to undergo a ritual washing of their hands and feet prior to performing their duties: <<*You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and wash them with water*>> (Exodus 29:4). The Pharisees had made this into a matter of ceremonial purity and, in their desire to meticulously avoid the possibility of becoming unclean, applied it to all Israelites.

That the practice of ceremonial washing had become widespread can be seen from the size of the water containers referred to when Jesus attended a wedding at Cana in Galilee: <<*Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons*>> (John 2:6).

³ He answered them, 'And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?'

Matthew 15:3

Why do you break the commandment of God. This would have been received as a serious accusation by the Pharisees who took pride in their adherence to the Law of Moses. That Jesus' claims were true held serious consequences for these men: <<*Then the spirit of God took possession of Zechariah son of the priest Jehoiada; he stood above the people and said to them, 'Thus says God: Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, he has also forsaken you'*>> (2 Chronicles 24:20). They would need to consider whom they should listen to, the elders or their God: <<*But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge*>> (Acts 4:19).

Jesus made a clear distinction between the OT Scriptures, which are the commandments of God, and the Pharisaic tradition, which consisted of merely human pronouncements and interpretations.

Jesus is not so much critical of these men as he is to their strict adherence to tradition, showing that human authority must never be submitted to when it is set up in competition with divine authority.

Jesus points out that, although the Pharisees use their traditions as a standard for righteousness, some of their traditions can be extended to contradict the written law. Christians today who strongly advocate particular views as biblical, yet cannot demonstrate them from Scripture understood in context, follow tradition rather than Scripture just as did many of Jesus' contemporaries did.

It should not be forgotten that, despite their bad press in the bible, many of the Pharisees truly believed they were serving God and did so wholeheartedly. Those in church today must guard against falling into the same trap by allowing their own traditions and ambitions to serve in ministry to get in the way of their personal relationship with God.

⁴ For God said, “Honour your father and your mother,” and, “Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.”

Matthew 15:4

Honour your father and your mother. Jesus quotes the 5th Commandment (Exodus 20:12), to demonstrate that what he is saying is firmly based on the Mosaic Laws and not on any traditions that have been adopted by man. He goes on to quote further from the Law, which is based on: <<*Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death*>> (Exodus 21:17), and: <<*All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them*>> (Leviticus 20:9), indicating the seriousness of opposing or abusing one’s parents. God made a promise of long life in the land to those who upheld this commandment: <<*‘Honour your father and mother’ – this is the first commandment with a promise*>> (Ephesians 6:2).

Jesus indicates that some traditions can be honourable, such as relying on the Word of God as the manual for life, living by it and testing all things by what it teaches and reveals about the true nature and character of God.

⁵ But you say that whoever tells father or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God”, then that person need not honour the father.

Matthew 15:5

Given to God reflects a technical term for a formal vow known as Corban, which is used specifically by Mark: <<*But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban” (that is, an offering to God)*>> (Mark 7:11). This allowed a person to be released from other responsibilities, such as caring for aging parents, i.e. whatever support you might have had, by making a financial contribution to the church, something that was welcomed and supported by the leaders, indicating their own hypocrisy.

⁶ So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.

Matthew 15:6

The Pharisees had made void the Word of God with their interpretations and rulings. Anyone who broke a vow, an introduced human law, in order to help needy parents, where breaking a vow itself would transgress God’s law, would have committed a serious transgression, according to the Pharisaic tradition. David had spoken out against the law breakers in his day, showing that God will take action against the transgressors: <<*It is time for the Lord to act, for your law has been broken*>> (Psalm 119:126).

Israel’s leaders had failed to learn from a mistake that had once been rectified in the days of the kings of Judah, only to be transgressed once again, ultimately resulting in exile: <<*When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded the priest Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Achbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary, and the king’s servant Asaiah, saying, ‘Go, inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did*

not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us’>> (2 Kings 22:11-13).

All Kingdom revelation comes from God through his prophets and apostles. It has been written down in Scripture and all subsequent interpretations or even new revelations should always be tested against the written Word of God.

The Pharisees then and the religious leaders today do not look for loopholes to circumvent the Word of God. Nevertheless, exploitation is bound to result in some instances if more time is spent in religious institutions, or within society generally, debating laws as laws rather than in teaching the ethical principles behind those laws. Jesus was not challenging Pharisaic viewpoints concerning parental support but the danger of evaluating morality on the basis of their extra-biblical traditions.

By demanding that morality be extrapolated from biblical principles, Jesus takes ethics out of the domain of the academy and courtroom, and places it in the daily lives of his followers. To follow Jesus’ guidelines here, church members need to know more about Scripture and the character of God that it reveals, and not more church rules that are not founded in Scripture.

⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸ “This people honours me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;

⁹ in vain do they worship me,

teaching human precepts as doctrines.”’

Matthew 15:7-9

Jesus followed up his quotation from the law by another from the revered prophet, taken here from Isaiah 29:13, where Isaiah speaks out against those who have lost sight of God in their hearts and made their relationship with him one of mechanical ritual. The Pharisees also knew that the prophecies were the Word of God and not of men: <<*First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation*>> (2 Peter 1:20).

The Pharisees were hypocrites for two reasons:

1. Their actions were merely external and did not come from their hearts.
2. Their teachings were not from God but simply reflect human tradition (vv.2-3).

Their hearts are far from me. The prophet Malachi would later pick up on this theme as well: <<*If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings; indeed I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart*>> (Malachi 2:2); so too Paul: <<*They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart*>> (Ephesians 4:18). It is the heart that God desires above all else: <<*My child, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways*>> (Proverbs 23:26).

In vain do they worship me. The Pharisees paid strict adherence to their religious duties but in their religion they had lost sight of its purpose, to bring honour and glory to God alone, and to perform his will, not theirs: *<<If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless>>* (James 1:26).

Teaching human precepts as doctrines is something that Paul was also critical of: *<<If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings>>* (Colossians 2:20-22).

IX.d.ii Matthew 15:10-20 - Things That Defile

The Pharisaic traditions had taken the laws dealing with moral cleanliness and turned it into an external ritual, forgetting the purposes that God had initially intended, in that his Priests should approach him in holiness and that the people should live physically and spiritually healthy lives.

There was a particular ritual in personal hygiene and observance of food laws rather than the moral cleanliness of a person's true character, which Jesus says is what God truly requires from his people.

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.'

Matthew 15:10-11

He called the crowd to him. Jesus had been engaged in a private conversation with the scribes and Pharisees but wanted the people to know that the teaching of the leaders was in error and that they should listen and understand, i.e. know what God actually wants from a person, rather than simply going through the motions. Jesus always favoured public debate on issues that were for general dissemination: *<<Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret>>* (John 18:20).

It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. It is not the food one eats that makes them unclean, it is the words they speak, and indeed the thoughts they hold, for they come from a person's heart and not their stomach. Paul wrote in similar vein: *<<For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit>>* (Romans 14:17), for: *<<To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted>>* (Titus 1:15).

Mark notes that this occasion represents a statement from Jesus declaring all foods to be clean if accepted as a gift from God. This was later made explicit to Peter in a vision he had while staying in Joppa, later recounted to church leaders in Jerusalem: *<<I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from*

heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane">> (Acts 11:5-9), and Paul accepted food selection as being a matter of personal choice rather than a law due to the revelation he had received directly from the Christ: <<I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean>> (Romans 14:14). Therefore, the Pharisees and scribes are in error in their criticism.

¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?' ¹³ He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.'

Matthew 15:12-13

Do you know that the Pharisees took offence. The disciples realised that this was a dangerous situation that Jesus had become engaged in, for these men wielded influence and power and would not have taken kindly to this very public rebuke. Jesus was skating on thin ice and his followers wanted to warn him for his own sake. However, Jesus is interested only in speaking God's truth, not in winning influential allies. When one is planning to get crucified anyway, one does not need to accommodate the opinions of those who lead God's people astray.

Jesus' reply was one of unconcern for himself and he showed that the Pharisees have not been planted by the Father, therefore they will be uprooted, their power and influence over the people removed, which occurred when the Romans destroyed the temple in AD70 during the Jewish-Roman war.

It should be noted that the positive statement is also true: <<Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land for ever. They are the shoot that I planted, the work of my hands, so that I might be glorified>> (Isaiah 60:21). **What God plants will produce an abundant Kingdom harvest.**

God had always wanted his people to seek and do his will above all else. For this reason he had planted them in Palestine, yet had uprooted them for the continued apostasy, despite the many prophetic warnings: <<If you will only remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I am sorry for the disaster that I have brought upon you>> (Jeremiah 42:10), and: <<Thus you shall say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: I am going to break down what I have built, and pluck up what I have planted – that is, the whole land>> (Jeremiah 45:4).

The Pharisees and scribes were Jews who were originally part of the royal vine planted by God but he had disowned all those who had moved away from his Word to teach their own traditions. Ironically, the well-respected Pharisaic teacher Gamaliel, when speaking of the apostles, was actually prophesying against the Pharisees: <<So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of

human origin, it will fail>> (Acts 5:38). It was the Pharisaic traditions and not Christianity that failed, for God's truth will never be uprooted.

¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.'

Matthew 15:14

Blind guides. The Pharisees were both blind to their own hypocrisy and blindly leading the people astray because they could not see the true intent of God's will in the OT. Ultimately, they and their followers will fall into a pit, one of eternal damnation, to join others who had rejected the true message of God. The prophets had spoken out against Israel's leaders who misled the people or had abused their positions of influence in the past: <<*My people – children are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O my people, your leaders mislead you, and confuse the course of your paths. The Lord rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. The Lord enters into judgement with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses*>> (Isaiah 3:12-14), and of being blinded by God for their failings in leadership: <<*For the Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep; he has closed your eyes, you prophets, and covered your heads, you seers*>> (Isaiah 29:10). They would dispute their blindness and thus bring a judgement of guilt upon their own heads: <<*Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.'* Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains>> (John 9:39-41).

Both will fall into a pit. If the people choose to follow blindly then they will suffer the same fate as their leaders, which is something that continues today and was not new in Jesus' era: <<*the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?*>> (Jeremiah 5:31), which demonstrates the teaching of Solomon: <<*What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun*>> (Ecclesiastes 1:9). All are under God's authority and are his to judge accordingly: <<*With him are strength and wisdom; the deceived and the deceiver are his*>> (Job 12:16).

¹⁵ But Peter said to him, 'Explain this parable to us.' ¹⁶ Then he said, 'Are you also still without understanding?'

Matthew 15:15-16

Explain this parable to us. Jesus had recently taught in parables about the Kingdom of God in Matthew Chapter 13 and the disciples had agreed that they understood what he was teaching them: <<*'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes'*>> (Matthew 13:51). Yet clearly they found the full interpretation of Jesus' teaching beyond them, as Jesus confirmed: are you also still without understanding? Jesus may have rebuked his disciples: <<*Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!*>> (Luke 24:25), but he never turned them away or

stopped loving and guiding them. He did so in love so they would be prepared for the work they had to do in order to spread the Gospel Jesus came to give to the whole world, thus building his church and Kingdom.

Even those who followed Jesus every day for several months and eventually for three years still found it difficult to break off from their worldly understanding and human constraints in order to grasp Kingdom concepts. This continued to the very end of Jesus' life: <<Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?'>> (John 14:9), then on into the early years of the church: <<For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food>> (Hebrews 5:12), and continues today, for even those who study the Scriptures still struggle to really grasp what Jesus wants from their lives.

¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.'

Matthew 15:17-20

Do you not see. Jesus went on to elaborate on his teaching from vv.10-11, making it quite clear that God requires a pure heart and not a ritual cleansing. Refer also to comments made on Mark 7:19 and 7:20-23, which can be found on the website.

Whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach. God had created humans to digest food in a way that the only thing the body retained was pure nutrition. The design of the body was very good, thus David exclaimed: <<I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well>> (Psalm 139:14). Most Jews were careful only to eat clean foods as prescribed in the Law, refer to Leviticus 11:1-47, which is confirmed by: <<Then I said, 'Ah Lord God! I have never defiled myself; from my youth up until now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by animals, nor has carrion flesh come into my mouth'>> (Ezekiel 4:14), and: <<Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean'>> (Acts 10:13-14), Jesus taught that this misses the point, which is that God wishes to remove the uncleanness from within a person's heart, mind and very soul.

For out of the heart come evil intentions. God had always opposed evil intent: <<Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power>> (Micah 2:1), and the remainder of the list of such intentions in this verse is basically covered in the second table of the Ten Commandments. Disciples are called to change in order to remove the impurities in their hearts: <<Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect>>

(Romans 12:2). This will result in them not speaking anything profane for the tongue reflects the heart: *<<And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell>>* (James 3:6).

Paul also warned of the evil intentions from the heart: *<<Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God>>* (Galatians 5:19-21). A bad tree will be known by its fruit!

To eat with unwashed hands does not defile but good personal hygiene practice should be recommended. If this was the most serious offence the Pharisees could level at Jesus' disciples then they were not doing too badly in learning to represent him after his ascension.

IX.d.iii Matthew 15:21-28 - The Canaanite Woman's Faith

Placed immediately after a discussion of purity in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus' encounter with this Gentile woman brings out the implications the evangelists find in his view of purity: Gentiles will no longer be separated from Israel.

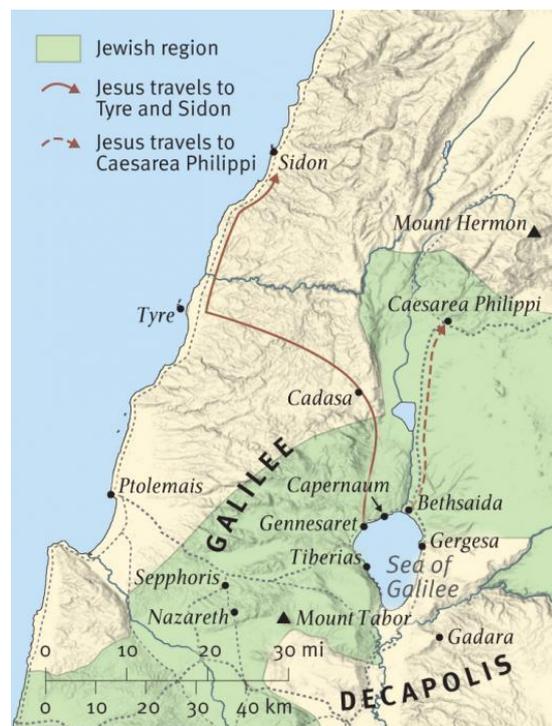
Like an earlier Gentile in Matthew's Gospel, this woman becomes an illustration of genuine faith. Also like the Roman centurion, this outsider's faith compares favourably with that of some religious insiders among Jesus' contemporaries. It was because of her faith that Jesus healed her demon possessed daughter.

²¹ **Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.**

Matthew 15:21

Jesus left that place. The last named place where Jesus was working was in the vicinity of Gennesaret, although Jesus had gone out teaching in the nearby towns and villages, probably making his way back to Capernaum, his main base.

Tyre and Sidon. Although Jesus continued in his Galilæan ministry, he withdrew to Gentile regions, possibly for some quiet time to teach the disciples or quite possibly to have this encounter with a Gentile woman. These were Gentile cities in Phœnicia, yet they knew about Jesus: *<<From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not*



The map shows the likely route that Jesus would have taken

want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice>> (Mark 7:24), and these cities were often the object of condemnation by OT prophets for their Baal worship and arrogant materialism.

Excavations have unearthed many remarkable finds at both Tyre and Sidon. Tyre evidences both Roman and Byzantine structures including, largely from after Jesus' time: a hippodrome; an immense bathhouse; a forum; a theatre; and tombs. It was originally a very wealthy trading sea port located on an offshore island, later connected to the mainland by a causeway during a siege in the days of Alexander the Great in the 4th Century BC.

Jesus had already spoken of how these cities would fare better at judgement than some of the Galilæan towns that he taught in: <<Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes>> (Matthew 11:21). This also indicates that perhaps the following healing occurred outside of these cities.

²² 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.'

Matthew 15:22

For this Canaanite woman, the title Lord is probably just an expression of great respect; she did not fully realise what she was saying, although her use of Son of David shows some knowledge of the Jewish thinking concerning him, as well as acceptance of his position in the race that had defeated her own ancestors. Refer also to comments made on v.27 for further considerations.

She probably knew about Eshmun, a pagan god of healing, whose temple was just 3 miles or 4.8km northeast of Sidon, but she had heard of Jesus and went to him instead; a wise decision.

Canaanite here means a non-Jewish pagan person living in that region. The term occurs only here in the NT, and in the complementary account Mark prefers to use her direct ethnicity: *<<Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter>>* (Mark 7:26). The Canaanite's embodied all that opposed God when he drove them out before his people as they came to settle in Palestine. Matthew clearly identifies her heritage to show that God's grace to Gentiles means all of them, irrespective of their race, gender, faith background, sexual orientation or past history. Christ had called all to repentance before God.

My daughter is tormented by a demon. Such an affliction would have been any parent's nightmare and this woman was clearly desperate for Jesus' intervention. She had undoubtedly heard of this remarkable Jew and was prepared to put her faith in him, even if she did not fully understand who he was or the testing she was about to undergo: *<<In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be*

found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed>> (1 Peter 1:6-7).

²³ 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.’ ²⁴ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’

Matthew 15:23-24

He did not answer her at all. It seemed as though her prayers would not be answered: <<*though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer*>> (Lamentation 3:8), but he was clearly listening to her cries for help: <<*Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me*>> (Job 23:6). God seems to do this sometimes perhaps to prove and thereby improve the faith of those who cry out to him for help.

Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us. Some commentators see this as a hard-hearted request by the disciples while others believe it to mean they wanted Jesus to send her away after curing her child. What should be considered here is that the woman would not take no for answer, for she knew that she had no one else to turn to, perhaps like the persistent widow: <<*He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming”’*>> (Luke 18:2-5), which teaches believers to persist in their prayers to God even if it may seem he is not answering those prayers, at least not in the way they expected.

The disciples were most likely concerned that the woman would become an unwanted distraction to the work they were there to do or to bring undesired attention to them. It was a similar situation to the disturbance caused in Philippi by a spirit possessed fortune teller: <<*One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour*>> (Acts 16:16-19).

Only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Later, through the apostles, the message of the Gospel would be taken out to the Gentiles, something Jesus would specifically command them to do: <<*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judæa and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*>> (Acts 1:8), but at this point in the unfolding of God’s purpose, the focus was on the Jews and their spiritual need: <<*These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*>> (Matthew 10:5-6), and: <<*Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding*

banquet>> (Matthew 22:9), where the wedding invitation to those not previously invited anticipates the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Even as the church grew across the Gentile regions it remained in God's plan to continue to offer salvation to his chosen people first: <<For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek>> (Romans 1:16), and this was a key purpose in sending his Son: <<For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs>> (Romans 15:8).

²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'

Matthew 15:25

Lord, help me. Her posture showed one of either reverence or more likely an act of desperation. However, it was a heartfelt plea of the type that Jesus will never ignore or fail to answer.

²⁶ He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'²⁷ She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'

Matthew 15:26-27

Jesus' noncommittal response was surprising and may seem offensive. He gave three comparisons:

- Food: referring to the Word of God, his Gospel message.
- Children: referring to the Jewish people.
- Dogs: referring to Gentiles.

Jews frequently insulted Gentiles by calling them dogs, which in ancient Palestine were wild, homeless scavengers. But the form Jesus uses here is the Greek *kynarion*, which means little dog, and may suggest a more affectionate term for domestic pets, something that Greeks of that era kept for their children. Jesus is not insulting the woman but testing her faith.

It is strange how quickly things can change. Paul would later refer to his own race as dogs in his ministry to the Gentiles, whom the Jews had always labelled as such: <<Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!>> (Philippians 3:2).

Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. The woman's response to Jesus' surprising statement was both humble and persistent. Perhaps she understood and humbly accepted that God called Israel first for a particular purpose: <<Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son'>> (Exodus 4:22). The woman presses Jesus, possibly by alluding to the extended blessings promised to the Gentiles through Abraham: <<I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed>> (Genesis 12:3), something which she

probably knew about, as Abraham was legendary in many cultures. Also refer to comments made on Jesus as the Son of Abraham in Matthew 1:1.

The crumbs that fall from their masters' table is a timely reminder of the twelve baskets full of crumbs collected after feeding the five thousand and the seven baskets full that would be collected shortly after this account, when Jesus fed a further four thousand men. Refer to vv.32-39 for the account of this miracle. They may only be crumbs but they are the crumbs from the Bread of Life.

28 Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15:28

Woman, great is your faith. Although God's plan was to bring salvation first to his chosen people Israel and then to Gentiles, yet he still responds to all who call on him in true faith. This Gentile woman's attitude of humble faith allowed Jesus' healing ministry to operate. It also demonstrates again that Jew and Gentile alike can only truly approach God through faith in his Christ.

The woman had displayed many commendable qualities including wisdom, humility, meekness, patience and perseverance in prayer; yet it was her great faith that Jesus commended, demonstrating how highly God values this virtue, even when it is still weak and under development.

She was the second Gentile to show exceptional faith, the other being the Roman centurion in Capernaum whose servant was ill: <<*When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith'*>> (Matthew 8:10), which is a clear contrast to his Jewish disciples who consistently showed only a small amount of faith: <<*But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?*>> (Matthew 6:30).

Her daughter was healed instantly. This Gentile woman had something else in common with the Roman centurion besides their great faith and that is that Jesus fulfilled their requests for healing without visiting the person who required healing, both of whom were healed the instant Jesus said it should be so. The driving out of the evil spirit from a distance indicates just how superior divine power is over the whole spiritual realm including its master. Refer to Matthew 8:5-13 for the full account of the centurion's servant.

In a similar miracle resulting from faith, Jesus once again healed instantly from a distance: <<*The official said to him, 'Sir, come down before my little boy dies.'* Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, 'Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him.' The father realised that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' So he himself believed, along with his whole household>> (John 4:49-53). Although the official's ethnicity is not identified there are many commentators who believe he was most likely a Gentile official in the service of Herod Antipas. All of these examples

demonstrate the remarkable compassion, grace and power that Jesus possesses, and is prepared to use in response to faith in him.

IX.d.iv Matthew 15:29-31 - Jesus Cures Many People

Jesus returned to the region of Galilee to resume his ministry of healing and teaching near to the lake. It seems there was an almost inexhaustible supply of sick and disabled people in the region. This may have been due to the harsh climatic and economic conditions in the region at that time, although certainly some of it was due to demonic attacks on people as Satan fought strongly to hold onto his own crumbling kingdom, which itself was under such a strong attack due to the presence of Jesus.

²⁹ After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. ³⁰ Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, ³¹ so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

Matthew 15:29-31

After Jesus had left that place refers to the region of Tyre and Sidon, where it seems that Jesus did no other work than to heal the demon possessed Gentile child. Although Jesus had sought time away from the crowds to teach his disciples, it seems this single incident was the sole lesson in grace and mercy that they needed to learn from him. It is similar to the hazardous sea crossing they had made in order to restore the demon possessed men in the Gadarenes, as recorded in Matthew 8:28-34. Having let a crumb fall from the table he now returned to prepare a feast for the children.

Great crowds came to him. After some time alone with his disciples, Jesus returned to meeting the people's physical needs. Nevertheless, only those who pressed on to become his servant-disciples would really come to know who he was.

Even his initial acts of compassion led to God's glory; although the crowds had exercised some faith in bringing the ailing to Jesus, they still were amazed by the miracles and praised the God of Israel.

He went up the mountain. Some commentators believe this to be in a range of hills above Tabgha near to Capernaum, from where it is traditionally held that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Refer to comments made in Matthew 5:1 concerning this location. Others believe he travelled once again to the Decapolis to a similar locale where he had fed the previous multitude.

IX.d.v Matthew 15:32-39 - Feeding the Four Thousand

Jesus had once again taught a large crowd, this time over a period of three days, and their provisions were exhausted. As with the previous account of feeding five thousand men on the eastern shore of the Lake, Jesus now repeats the miracle in a similar environment.

That the crowd was smaller at four thousand men, and the original provision of food slightly more than was available before, in no way detracts from the miracle. In fact, it is a reminder that God's design rather than natural considerations determines the magnitude of any miracle.

³² Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.'

Matthew 15:32

Jesus called his disciples to him. Jesus wanted them to know his own feelings of compassion, no doubt with the aim of exciting the compassion for people within them. The message is clear for all others who would call themselves followers of Jesus; a genuinely compassionate nature should accompany the claim.

As in the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew 14:13-21, Jesus felt compassion for the crowd that had gathered to seek his healing and to hear him teach.

They have been with me now for three days. It is assumed that the crowd had gathered initially to have their sicknesses healed but Jesus had so captivated them with his Kingdom proclamations that they had remained with him much longer.

Three days is a period that appears on many significant occasions in Scripture and the reader may wish to search through the different occurrences and ponder how often it was the case that it would eventually point to the death and resurrection of Jesus. For other significant occurrences of this time period refer to the supplementary material for Matthew's Gospel on the website.

I do not want to send them away hungry. Jesus could have fed them three times a day if he had wanted to but there is a lesson here from Israel's days in the wilderness: <<*He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord*>> (Deuteronomy 8:3), although there was also a genuine concern for their physical welfare, i.e. they might faint on the way. For those who follow Jesus to the end the promise is: <<*They will hunger no more, and thirst no more*>> (Revelation 7:16).

Had Jesus allowed these people to go away hungry then it would have been a poor reflection on him, his Father and his family, the church. Faith calls for action: <<*If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead*>> (James 2:15-17).

³³ The disciples said to him, 'Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?'

Matthew 15:33

Where are we to get enough bread. It seems the disciples had already forgotten about the power of Jesus' miracle on the previous occasion and were once again trapped by their worldly analysis of the situation. This appears something that the modern church also fails to grasp. If something is done according to the will of God then he will always provide what is needed, whether in abundance or just sufficient matters not. Sometimes he provides what is needed ahead of time and on other occasions he requires the church to step out in faith and he provides as a response to that faith.

Moses had posed a similar question to God in the wilderness: <<Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?>> (Numbers 11:22); God's response was manna from heaven for nearly forty years!

³⁴ Jesus asked them, 'How many loaves have you?' They said, 'Seven, and a few small fish.'

Matthew 15:34

In Scripture seven was usually symbolic of perfection or completion; here the number may symbolise the fullness of God's provision for all peoples, now including Gentiles. As Israel rejects the Kingdom, Gentiles would increasingly come into view, especially following the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

It should be noted that Jesus did not rebuke his disciples for their lack of faith but continued in his compassion for the people. Some people argue that the bible teaches that God only acts in response to faith, whereas this account is one that shows that, at times, he acts ahead of that faith in order to show that his followers can trust him to meet their needs in order to facilitate the growth of their faith.

³⁵ Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, ³⁶ he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ³⁷ And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. ³⁸ Those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children.

Matthew 15:35-38

This is very similar to what occurred when Jesus fed the five thousand and this was commented on in Matthew 14:13-21.

After giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples. Matthew records Jesus using the Aramaic equivalent to the Greek word *eucharistesas* to show thanksgiving to the Father. On the previous occasion in Matthew 14:19 Jesus had blessed the bread, Greek *eulogese*.

Once again, Jesus shows the need not to waste resources, this time seven baskets full of leftover bread, for his people are called to be good stewards of all things.

³⁹ After sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.



Galilee and the surrounding region

Matthew 15:39

There are no historical or archæological records of Magadan, mentioned only here in the NT. Most likely it is a variant spelling for Magdala, the original residence of Mary Magdalene, in Jewish territory on the west bank of Galilee.