

Matthew 15:21-39

Review

Last time, we looked at the first half of Matthew 15. Recall that in response to the Pharisees' accusation that Jesus' disciples were violating their tradition by not washing their hands before eating, Jesus turned the accusation right back onto them by asking why another of their traditions violated the 5th Commandment to honor our fathers and mothers. Then Jesus used the opportunity to teach His disciples that it is not the food that we eat or the manner we eat it which defiles us, but the words that proceed from our hearts out our mouths, saying that good people bring forth good words from their good hearts, but evil folks bring forth evil words from their evil hearts.

Recall that we noted the importance when studying the gospel accounts of also studying any available parallel passages in the other gospels. Regarding Matthew 15:1-20, we saw that the parallel passage in Mark 7 contained some parenthetical explanations of Jewish practices which Mark believed his intended, mixed-multitude audience might need to have so they could understand the passage, while Matthew didn't find it necessary to include such explanations for his intended Jewish audience.

Let's continue now with our verse-by-verse study in Matthew. In chapter 15, we see a continuation of the narrative pattern Matthew used in the previous chapter – alternating Jesus' teaching with stories of His miracles. The obvious reason that Matthew recounts so many stories of Jesus' miracles is his desire to convince his Jewish readers that Jesus **is** their מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach**, because only someone with supernatural power can do such signs and wonders. When the Jewish leader Nicodemus visited Jesus by night, he began the conversation by saying just that.

2b... *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."* John 3:2b (ESV)

Nicodemus stopped short of saying (or likely believing) that Jesus **is** God who had come to Earth in the flesh of a man. But of course, that is exactly what Matthew was trying to convince his readers of, so he recounted the stories of miracles that could only be accomplished by God's Spirit manifested in Jesus' works. In this Matthew agreed with Jesus Himself when He chastised Philip after the final meal with His disciples before He was handed over to be crucified. Philip had asked Jesus to show them the Father.

10 *Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11* *Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.* John 14:10-11 (ESV)

Yet early in His ministry, Jesus usually admonished those whom He had helped, to keep quiet about the miracle. When the Jewish leaders asked Jesus to show them a miracle to prove His messianic claim, Jesus refused.

39b... *"An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40* *For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.* Matthew 12:39b-40 (ESV)

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Why did Jesus take this position regarding His miracles until later in His ministry? I think there are two reasons. Firstly, Jesus never performed signs and wonders simply to put on a show so that witnesses would believe in Him. Quite the contrary. Most often when He healed someone it was in **response** to their faith, not vice versa. Furthermore, Jesus knew that performing a miracle at the demand of the Pharisees wouldn't bring them to repentance and a saving belief in His Gospel. Jesus knew that even after witnessing a miracle, they would try to "rationally" explain it away rather than simply accepting their experience of Jesus' divine power, just as most people continue to do today. Jesus knows that we can only come to saving faith if our Father draws us to Himself through the conviction of His Spirit.

44*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.* John 6:44 (ESV)

So, with these principles understood, let's examine the next miracle reported by Matthew.

21*And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22*And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." **23***But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." 24*He answered, "**I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**" **25***But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26*And he answered, "**It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.**" **27***She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28*Then Jesus answered her, "**O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.**" *And her daughter was healed instantly.* Matthew 15:21-28 (ESV)

As with any part of the gospel narratives, it is always important to consider any parallel passages together. God purposefully gave us four gospel accounts, not to cause confusion or conflict, but that all might be edified by considering different points of view concerning the same event. Mark gives us a parallel account of this healing of a Canaanite woman's daughter.

24*And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. 25*But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. **26***Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27*And he said to her, "**Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.**" **28***But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29*And he said to her, "**For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.**" **30***And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.* Mark 7:24-30 (ESV)

ASIDE – Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called synoptic (same view) gospels. But this is somewhat unfair. When a teacher grading test papers discovers that two students have given identical answers,

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there are two possibilities why. On the one hand, we could assume that one student copied the others' answer. Of course, if both students have identical **wrong** answers, it's more likely that one of them copied the other's paper. But if the answers are both correct, it's more likely that two diligent and intelligent students both arrived at the same conclusion independently.

But in the case of the gospel accounts, even that assumption is unfair. We know and trust that God's Word is just that – **God's** Word. Certainly, Matthew, Mark, and Luke were their own men with independent minds. Yet as born-again believers in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they were all unified in the Spirit of God who impelled them to write their gospel accounts. In effect they all copied (using their own style and wording) from God's paper, and God's answers are **always** correct.

God gave us four gospel accounts for His own good reasons. As we have already seen, the gospel writers each had their own viewpoint and their own purpose for writing. For example, Matthew came to the writing desk with a lifetime of experience living the life of a Jew under the Roman occupation. Thus, he brought with him various assumptions and expectations quite different from those brought by the Gentile Christ follower Luke. The motivation for writing, intended audience, wording, and style of these two was naturally somewhat different even though they reported independently many of the same events. God allowed and encouraged this diversity in the gospel accounts knowing that down through the years each of them would "strike a chord" in different ways with different readers who would bring their own assumptions and expectations coming out of their individual life experiences. In effect, God was taking a shotgun approach knowing that this would offer the best chance for someone to accept and believe the Gospel message.

21 ***And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.*** Matthew 15:21 (ESV)

As we mentioned in our study of the first half of Matthew 15, it isn't completely clear where Jesus came from to reach Tyre and Sidon. Possibly He came from the plain of Gennesaret just north of Mary Magdalene's home – Magdala (Magadan) where Matthew 14 reports He and the disciples landed after the feeding of the 5000. We need to be cautious drawing that conclusion though because we know that ancient Jewish narratives are rarely strictly chronological.

As we know, Tyre and Sidon are located on the coast of what is now southern Lebanon. They had once been prosperous and powerful Phoenician seaports. The population of Tyre and Sidon was largely Gentile with possibly some Jewish residents to whom Jesus came to minister. But Jesus may have gone to Tyre and Sidon specifically to minister to this particular woman's daughter, despite His protestations about having been sent only to ***"...the lost sheep of the house of Israel."***

He had gone to a Gentile land specifically to minister to a Gentile before. At least Matthew had reported a similar incident earlier in his gospel (Matthew 8). Jesus and His disciples journeyed across the sea to the Decapolis city Gadara to cast multiple demons out of a young Gentile man into a herd of pigs. Once He had done that, He immediately returned across the sea. Evidently, He made that trip just to minister to a single Gentile. Of course, in calming the storm on the return trip, He also had the opportunity to give His disciples a lesson about faith.

Mark tells us that Jesus came to Tyre and Sidon hoping He wouldn't be discovered. Possibly, he was weary from all the healing and teaching He had been doing, and just needed to rest up. Certainly, Jesus is God almighty, yet in the flesh of a man He was subject to the same bodily weariness and

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needs that we are. He had to eat and drink. He also needed to sleep in restful solitude – something He found increasingly difficult to do as His increasing fame preceded Him wherever He went. Possibly, Jesus came to Tyre and Sidon simply to spend time alone with His Father as He so often did.

22And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” 23But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” Matthew 15:22-23 (ESV)

Matthew tells us that this woman was a Canaanite, but Mark reports that she was a Syrophoenician. Is this a conflict between the accounts? No! The name Canaanite originally referred to all the occupants of the land of Palestine prior to its conquest by the Israelites under Joshua. The name encompasses both the various “-ites” that the Israelites conquered, and those whom they did not. By the time of Jesus’ ministry, the name Canaanite had come to mean specifically Phoenicians. Although Phoenician power and prosperity had long since dissipated after their conquests by the Persians, Greeks, and Romans, the Phoenician people remained in the region of Tyre and Sidon. Mark tells us that this particular woman was of mixed Syrian and Phoenician descent.

What’s most important to note in verse 22 though is that this woman recognized Jesus as “***Lord, Son of David.***” Although she was certainly a Gentile, she nevertheless recognized Jesus as the promised Jewish מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach**! Only Matthew makes note of this. Mark does not. It was important for Matthew to ensure his Jewish audience was aware that even some of the Gentiles recognized Jesus as מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach**. But Mark’s intended Gentile readers would not have needed so much to know this, so he doesn’t mention it.

24He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” 26And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Matthew 15:24-26 (ESV)

Frankly, I find these few verses disturbing and confusing – maybe even a bit unsavory. Mark’s account is no help, being quite sparse on this point. In fact, I think Mark’s Gentile audience would have had difficulty understanding his cryptic statement in Mark 7:27.

27And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Mark 7:27 (ESV)

Of course, Jesus came in the flesh of a Jewish man, not a Gentile. All the disciples He called were Jews despite the presence of many Gentiles in Roman-occupied Israel. With a few notable exceptions like the Gadarene out of whom Jesus cast the legion of demons and this Canaanite woman, Jesus’ ministry in Galilee and His later ministry in Jerusalem was focused on proclaiming the coming of His Kingdom to Jews. It was critical for His ministry to be that way in order that He might fulfill the messianic prophecies about Him, particularly God’s promise to Abraham when he showed he was willing to obey God’s call to sacrifice Isaac.

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¹⁸*“In your seed [offspring] all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”* Genesis 22:18 (NKJV)

Certainly, both Jews and Gentiles were in the habit of referring to the others as “**dogs**.” Yet I find it disturbing for Jesus to have spoken this way. After all, He specifically invited all people – not just Jews – to come to Him as Matthew himself reports.

²⁸***Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.***

Matthew 11:28 (ESV)

It occurs to me that Jesus might have made this distasteful statement to the Syrophenician woman purposefully to give her the opportunity to respond as she did. After all, He already knew that He would heal the woman’s daughter. In fact, it is very likely that He journeyed to the region of Tyre and Sidon for that exact reason.

²⁷*She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”* ²⁸*Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.”* And her daughter was healed instantly

[from that very hour]. Matthew 15:27-28 (ESV)

Here we see yet another confirmation of an important principle built into Jesus’ ministry and His Gospel. It was this woman’s faith that brought Jesus to her region for the purpose of healing her daughter. Her faith wasn’t the result of that healing. Quite the contrary.

CAUTION – In our world today unprincipled, ungodly, con men are twisting scriptures like this passage to justify the satanic prosperity gospel lie they use to line their own pockets at the expense of the gullible. We must be careful not to extrapolate from the fact that Jesus so often accompanied His miraculous healing with the statement “**your faith has made you well**,” to fall into the trap of believing the false prosperity gospel lie that if we only have enough faith, God will give us every possible blessing we might desire and request. In this woman’s case and many others, there was a clear, critical, desperate need for her daughter to be healed. She didn’t ask anything from Jesus for herself, but only that He would heal her daughter – which she honestly believed in her heart and proclaimed aloud that Jesus could and would do.

²⁹*Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there.* ³⁰*And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them,* ³¹*so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.* Matthew 15:29-31 (ESV)

The parallel passage in Mark 7 gives us some additional details about the healing of a particular deaf man mentioned only in passing by Matthew.

³¹*Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.* ³²*And they brought to him a*

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man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. ³⁴And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.” Mark 7:31-37 (ESV)

Mark tells us here that the healing of this deaf man took place in the region of Decapolis. Recall from our [Bible Lands Tour](#) that the name Decapolis means ten cities, and that the region of Decapolis where most of the ten were located was to the south and east of the Sea of Galilee. The route Jesus took from Tyre to Decapolis that Mark details is circuitous. Mark says that Jesus passed through Sidon which is to the north of Tyre in the opposite direction from Decapolis. Remember that the gospel narratives are rarely chronological. This makes it tedious to make an exhaustive chronological “Harmony of the Gospels.” Jesus must have gone out of His way for some good reason, but that reason isn’t readily apparent just from these two passages.

One of the cities of the Decapolis was Gadara in the land of the Gadarenes where Jesus cast a multitude of demons named Legion from a possessed Gadarene man into a herd of swine. It is almost certain that the possessed Gadarene man was a Gentile because of course obedient Jews do not eat or herd swine since pigs do not chew the cud although they do have cloven hooves (Leviticus 11:7).

It is possible that the deaf man Mark writes about here in this parallel passage was also a Gentile. The region of Decapolis was populated by Jews and Hellenist Gentiles along with the Roman occupiers at the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry. We see a clue to this in Matthew 15:31 where Matthew says that the crowd “**glorified the God of Israel.**” In the Greek, Matthew 15:31 does not call God by name. To Matthew’s Jewish audience, the unwritten implication would have been that these people were Gentiles. Matthew seems to be implying to his Jewish readers – “See. The Gentiles understood that Jesus did these miracles by the power of God.”

It is interesting that Mark makes mention that Jesus sighed after lifting His eyes to Heaven before commanding the man’s ears to be opened. This detail seems to indicate that perhaps Mark witnessed this healing himself. Remember that by this time Jesus had many more devoted followers than the twelve that are mentioned by name in the gospel accounts. Perhaps Mark was one of them. Either that, or whoever recounted this story to Mark was impressed enough by Jesus’ sigh to mention it to Mark in the retelling.

³²Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.” ³³And the disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?” ³⁴And Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” ³⁵And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, ³⁶he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke

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them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ³⁷And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. ³⁸Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. ³⁹And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan. Matthew 15:32-39 (ESV)

This feeding of 4,000 men plus women and children may have taken place in the Decapolis, or possibly not. Therefore, the crowd that was fed may have been mixed Jews and Gentiles, or may have been Jews only. Matthew's account says that after healing the woman of Tyre's daughter... ***“Jesus went on from there...”*** Mark's parallel account of the healings Matthew subsequently reported in Matthew 15:29-31 indicates that those healings took place in Decapolis as we have just seen. But Matthew's account doesn't make that explicit connection.

Neither Matthew nor Mark make an explicit time and place connection between those healings and this feeding of 4,000 men in addition to women and children. Matthew just says ***“Then...”*** to lead into the story of this feeding, which may or may not mean immediately afterward. Mark's account is even vaguer, saying only... ***“In those days.”*** So, we need to be cautious not to read too much into the juxtaposition of the stories in the two gospels.

If indeed this feeding did take place in Decapolis, then we can assume that the crowd was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. For them to break bread together would have been a violation of the Jewish traditions that Jesus spoke out against in Matthew 14. To my knowledge, there is nothing in the Law of Moses that forbids Jews from breaking bread with Gentiles. Yet by the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, a tradition had been enforced by the Jewish elders forbidding Jews to share food or drink with Gentiles. This is just the sort of legalism that Jesus loved to brazenly flaunt, pointing out the silliness and hypocrisy of the man-made traditions for all those present – both Jewish leaders and ordinary Jews.

What's more important is the way Jesus carried out this miraculous feeding. There are several stories about bread in the ministry of Jesus. We've already looked at the feeding of the 5,000 (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:45-52, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-14). Of course, bread plays a central role in this passage we are currently studying (Matthew 15:32-39, Mark 8:1-10).

In the upper room on the night He was betrayed, Jesus compared the bread of the final meal He shared with His disciples before His crucifixion to His body (Matthew 26:26, Luke 22:19), saying ***“This is my body which is given for you.”*** On the day after the feeding of the 5,000, He had foretold the sacrifice of His body on the cross, saying...

⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” John 6:51 (ESV)

On each of these occasions, prior to eating the bread, Jesus had held it up, given thanks to His Father for it, and finally broken it before giving it to His disciples.

On the same day that His disciples discovered His empty tomb, the risen Lord appeared to two of His disciples who were journeying from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). These two disciples didn't recognize Him as He walked with them all day long until that evening when He broke bread with them.

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30When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. 31And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. 32They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” 33And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, 34saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” 35Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread. Luke 24:30-35 (ESV)

Recall that in the story of the feeding of the 5,000 that the disciples had gathered 12 baskets of leftovers after everyone had eaten and was satisfied. Presumably, each of the 12 disciples working to feed the crowd gathered one basket of leftovers. The significance of them taking up 7 baskets of leftovers after the 4,000 had eaten is not as apparent. In the Bible, the number 7 always represents completeness or perfection, but that is as much as I can glean from the passage.

Before we close, note that Matthew says that after the meal Jesus sent the crowds away and got into a boat to go to the region of Magadan. Recall that Magadan is also known as Magdala – the home of Mary Magdalene. It is located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee near Mount Arbel a few miles south of Jesus’ Galilean home base – Capernaum. This lends support to the idea that the feeding of the 4,000 took place in Decapolis on the opposite shore of the lake.

Mark’s account says that after feeding the 4,000, Jesus and His disciples immediately departed by boat *for the district of Dalmanutha* (Mark 8:10). Dalmanutha was a town near Magdala on the western shore of the sea.

Looking Ahead

God willing, next time we’ll continue with our study of Matthew.