

MATTHEW 15

THINGS THAT TRULY DEFILE

In the first nine verses of this chapter, we learn that no single duty that the Lord has laid upon us may be pleaded for the neglect of any other. The scribes were persons who – at a time when there was no such thing as printing – wrote out copies of the Jewish Scriptures. Hence they came to be also regarded as interpreters of their meaning, since they were so well acquainted with them. But these scribes – together with the Pharisees – would teach the people to observe matters that were merely of man’s invention, with no less care and diligence than the Law of Moses itself. For example, they made up some very particular and precise rules concerning the washing of their hands at each meal for ceremonial purposes, and not for the simple benefit of cleanliness and good hygiene. In fact, one collection of Jewish writings even went so far as to say that “he who does not wash his hands before eating is as bad as a murderer!”

No wonder, then, that the scribes and the Pharisees complained to our Lord when His disciples did not observe these rigorous traditions. But Jesus replied by showing them that their extra-Biblical traditions were not only lacking Divine authority; but in some instances, they were actually contradictory to the Lord’s plainest commands! They had made the plainly-stated commandments of God to be ineffectual because of their own man-invented traditions, but they had persuaded themselves that they were doing service to God. If we are modeling our lives according to the Scriptures, we shall find that we never have any duties that are truly conflicting. The Lord will never expect us to do something – no matter how good or religious it sounds – if it is in contradiction to what He has clearly outlined or taught in His written Word. We shall not find it difficult to decide what to do if our hearts earnestly desire to do God’s will.

The great lesson in verses 10-20 is that we should be clean before God in our hearts. Jesus had just reproved the Pharisees for teaching the traditions of mere man as if they were as authoritative as Divine doctrines (verse 9). Now He explains more fully, to the multitude, His reasons for rejecting the particular “tradition” of the ceremonial handwashing before meals. He bids them to “hear and understand.” It is not that which goes into the mouth, as food that is eaten with unwashed hands, that defiles a man. Rather, “that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man,” said the Savior. Even Christ’s disciples did not appear to have understood these words, although they reported to Him that the Pharisees were angry at them. But He replied that, whether they were offended or not, it was necessary to root out every plant which God had not planted – that

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ Jesus speaks about human traditions vs. God’s commandments – verses 1-9
- ❖ He warns the multitude about things which truly defile a person – verses 10-20
- ❖ He heals a demon-possessed girl – verses 21-28
- ❖ He heals many others and miraculously feeds another crowd – verses 29-39



is, every precept which man's tradition, and not God's Law, had established. The disciples, however, could not seem to wrap their minds around this doctrine in question: the thing which defiles a person is not so much what goes into his mouth, as what comes out of his heart. The Jewish ceremonial handwashings were not worth anything unless they were signifying the purity of the heart, and expressing its devotion to God's will. And in any case, to substitute these outward rituals for the inward service of the heart is most obvious and offensive hypocrisy! It is in the heart that Christ surveys the condition of the soul; and according to what He sees there, He counts us either as transgressors or as His believing children. Therefore, if we entertain any evil thoughts in our hearts, let us repent of them and beseech the Lord Jesus to wash us – not with water, but in His blood, which alone can make our hearts clean and pure!

Verses 21-28 reveal the details of the healing of a Syrophenician woman's demon-possessed daughter. This poor woman was not a Jew. For the only recorded time in our Savior's earthly ministry, He departed out of Israel and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon; and there He manifested His great power to a Gentile believer. "O woman, great is thy faith!" were the words of praise which followed her humble pleadings, which she repeated despite several rebuffs that she received. And the blessing for her daughter, which the Lord had been seeming to withhold, was graciously conferred. However little our petitions may seem to avail at first, let us never relax in their urgent utterance. Let us always remember that God may seem to withhold His good things from us for a time, but only in order to more effectually bestow them in the end.

In the last chapter, we learned how the Savior fed 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes; and immediately prior to that miracle, He had first healed the sick amongst them (see chapter 14:14-21). And in this chapter also, we find that the people were once again made to wonder in amazement as they witnessed the healing of the maimed, the lame, the blind, and others. This time, they remained with Jesus for three whole days; and at length, they had nothing left to eat. Yet they did not complain of their hunger; rather, they left it for Jesus to first say, "I have compassion on the multitude." If we seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and take no anxious thought for this world's food, then we shall always find that God Himself thinks of us and cares for us. From this miracle, let us never forget that our God can "prepare a table" for His people, even "in the wilderness" (Ps. 78:20). The same One Who used a small number of loaves and a few little fishes to satisfy the hunger of 4,000 men – not counting the women and children – is the One Who works out good things for us in the barren desert of this world, despite our own slender provisions.

We praise You, Lord Jesus, for Your merciful compassion; for You behold the multitudes of lost and hungry souls and fill them with the Bread of Life! Amen.