

Week 17: Matthew 15

Hook



Main Point: In the Upside-Down Kingdom, your religion is not as important as your heart.

The term “house poor” describes those who spend more than 30 percent of their total household income on housing costs; this predicament often leaves families concerned over making their mortgage and unable to save money. According to the U.S. Census Bureau and the Zillow Home Price index, nearly 17 million American homeowners and 20 million American renter households fall into this category. The climate is ripe for folks to become “house poor” when home values rise at a rate higher than income growth. Below are the U.S. cities that are home to the highest percentages of “house poor” residents. Attempt to put them in order from 10 to 1 (1 being the most “house poor”).ⁱ

- A. Oakland, California
- B. New Orleans, Louisiana
- C. Honolulu, Hawaii
- D. Anaheim, California
- E. Los Angeles, California
- F. San Diego, California
- G. Bakersfield, California
- H. New York, New York
- I. Long Beach, California
- J. Miami, Florida

(Answer Key: 10. C; 9. F; 8. B; 7. G; 6. A; 5. D; 4. H; 3. J; 2. I; 1. E)

Transition: Curbside appeal may convince strangers that “house poor” families are in great financial situations. Today we will discuss the difference between appearances and what’s happening on the inside.

Week 17: Matthew 15

Book

Main Point: In the Upside-Down Kingdom, your religion is not as important as your heart.

Matthew 15:1–20 [Read]

Talking Point 1: What you do matters because it reveals what is in your heart.

Q: Both ritual purity laws (“what goes into your mouth”) and what you say (“what comes out”) are external actions. What is the difference between them? How does one reflect your heart, but the other doesn’t?

Q: Why does Jesus consider the Pharisees to be hypocrites?

Yet again, Jesus encountered some Pharisees who criticized His disciples for breaking their traditions – not God’s law, but the extra rules the Pharisees added to the law. They even admitted this was a “tradition of the elders” (v. 2). This time it was the ritual of handwashing before meals. We do this today for hygiene purposes, but they did it for religious reasons. God’s law made a sharp distinction between clean and unclean as part of the Israelites’ consecrating themselves to the Lord. As holy people, they were not to eat unclean animals or touch unclean things. If they did touch something or someone who was unclean, they were to wash themselves and their clothes thoroughly and offer a purification sacrifice at the tabernacle. God’s law also required priests to wash their hands and feet to purify themselves before entering the tabernacle or offering sacrifices (Exodus 30:17–21).

From the general concept of washing being connected to ritual cleanliness, some Jewish elders developed a tradition of washing hands before and after eating, before worship, before the priestly blessing, and upon waking in the morning – in addition to any time you touched something unclean, returning from a cemetery, after intercourse and other bodily functions.ⁱⁱ There were even rules about what kind of water to use (naturally pure, unused, not containing other substances, not discolored), how to purify the water with a specific blessing (“Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us through your commandments and has commanded us concerning the washing of hands”),ⁱⁱⁱ how much water to use,^{iv} how to raise and lower your hands,^v and exactly how to pour it.^{vi} The ritual washing before meals became such an important part of Judaism that the Babylonian Talmud said those who willfully neglected its practice would be excommunicated^{vii} and “uprooted from this world.”^{viii} It said not washing your hands before meals was akin to sleeping with a prostitute.^{ix} Though the Talmud was not completed until after the time of Jesus (A.D. 500), these teachings were already being taught and practiced, especially by religious sticklers such as the scribes and Pharisees. The Pharisees’ teachings were the foundation of the Talmud. Over time, the Pharisaic conception of purity became normative in Judaism.^x

Jesus showed them how adding these kinds of laws can actually conflict with the moral purpose of Scripture. By focusing on the letter of the law, they could miss the spirit. God's law gives us biblical principles to follow. When we add our own detailed rules such as this, we can create a system that enables someone to follow the traditions perfectly, but break the principle. The example Jesus gave is the tradition of dedicating an object for sacred use. When a person dedicated something to the temple, it was set apart; no one could use it. People sometimes used this tradition to keep family members from inheriting their property. If they didn't want their annoying brother-in-law to eat their figs, they just declared them dedicated to the Lord.^{xi}

Jesus' example shows how this type of loophole can be used to break the principle of God's law, and He intentionally uses one of the Pharisees' most treasured principles from the Old Testament – honor your father and mother (Exodus 20:12). Jesus said this about those who devote property to God that could be used to help their mother and father: "that for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God" (v. 6). Biblical scholar Craig S. Keener wrote, "This is a natural end result of spending more time debating laws as laws than in teaching ethical principles behind the laws."^{xii} This problem has been repeated in generation after generation, in many different religions. If we teach the rules for the sake of rules alone instead of as moral principles, people will create loopholes to do evil things but still officially "keep the law." This is how religious legalism actually *creates* hypocrites (v. 7). But if we teach the moral principles behind the laws and show how the laws are *applications* of those principles, people learn to translate the principles behind the laws to apply in any circumstance in their lives. This is the goal of exegesis and hermeneutics.

The Pharisees' focus on the laws instead of the principles, the letter instead of the spirit, had created an entire generation of hypocrites – people who honored God with their lips but whose hearts were far from Him (vv. 8–9). We must take care not to do the same. But that doesn't mean we throw out all rules. It means we explain the purpose of the rules and the heart behind them. Jesus didn't discourage faith in action; He commanded us not just to listen to His words but *do* them. By contrasting what goes into the mouth with what comes out of it, He explained how these "religious rituals" are not real faith in action. External rituals don't come from the heart. They aren't spiritual fruit that reflect a heart that has been made new by the Holy Spirit. They are not the things we should judge faithfulness by. The Pharisees were right in that you can judge someone's faithfulness by their actions, by their fruit. They just chose the wrong kind of actions. The list Jesus gave here of "things that defile a person" is similar to the contrast of the "deeds of the flesh" and the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. These are the external actions we can judge a person's faithfulness by because they are actions that come out of the heart.

Q: How have you seen a legalistic understanding of God's law create hypocrisy in the world around you? What kind of damage does that cause?

Q: How can we tell the difference between which actions are empty ritual and which actions reveal your heart? Is there any overlap? Can we do ritual things with a godly heart?

Q: How can we be sure our own hearts are pure?

Matthew 15:21–28 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Jesus' specific mission was to Israel, but the kingdom of God is for all.

Q: Why doesn't Jesus send the Canaanite woman away, as the disciples asked?

This story can be hard to understand without some cultural context. In first-century culture, men usually did not speak to women, and Jews did not speak to Gentiles. This woman was a Canaanite (a Gentile) and a woman, so a Jewish man such as Jesus would have had two reasons not to talk to her. Also, her daughter was possessed by a demon, which made them both outcasts, even in their own Gentile city. So, she had three strikes against her.

The Canaanites were some of Israel's biggest enemies. They had lived in the Promised Land for years and years before the Israelites came. Before the region was called Israel, it was called the land of Canaan. Many different tribes of people lived in the land before the Israelite conquest – Amorites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Hittites, etc. Sometimes the word "Canaanite" is used to refer to one specific tribe that lived along the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River (Numbers 13:29). At other times, it refers to all the tribes that lived in the land of Canaan (Genesis 36). Though there were many different tribes, they shared a general culture, including language, religion, political forms, legal institutions, and domestic arts.^{xiii}

When the Israelites conquered the land, God instructed them to utterly destroy all of the tribes who lived there so that the Promised Land would hold only the people who followed Him. But they didn't. Many from the Canaanites tribes lived among them, intermarried with them, and drew them away from worshipping God alone to worship their Canaanite gods, such as Baal and Asherah, as well. But some of the Canaanites chose Israel's God over their own and became heroes of the Old Testament. Tamar, Rahab and Ruth were all Canaanite women who even became ancestors of Jesus. The nationality of Bathsheba, the fourth woman in the genealogy of Jesus, is unclear, but she was married to a Canaanite. Women were typically not mentioned in genealogies at all, yet Matthew specifically included these four women to make a point – Jesus came not only for the noble Jews, but for the Gentiles, the poor, the sinners and the outcasts.

This story is one of many where Jesus showed us His love and care for the outcast. When we read the story without knowing all the background, it might seem that Jesus was dismissing the woman or even being mean to her, calling her a dog. Some Jewish people did call Gentiles dogs, but that's not what Jesus was doing. Jesus used a play on words to actually say the opposite – that she had value in God's kingdom.

She cried out to Jesus and, at first, He didn't answer. Not because He was ignoring her or being rude, but likely because He wanted to see what His disciples would do and what she would do.

His pause provided a test for her faith, to see if she would continue to persist.^{xiv} The disciples begged Jesus to send her away the same way they shooed the children away from Him (Mark 10:13–16).

Jesus was an honorable rabbi, the future king of Israel. For Him to even acknowledge her would have been shameful in their culture. But He didn't send her away. Instead, as He had done with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), He engaged in a deep (though brief) theological conversation with her. This would have been shocking, as women typically were not educated and didn't learn the intricacies of theology. But this was the Jesus who invited Mary to sit at His feet and learn from Him just as the men were doing (Luke 10:38–42).

First, Jesus said His ministry was only to the lost sheep of Israel. (His disciples would be the ones to spread the kingdom to the Gentile world). But when He said it wasn't right to take the children's bread and give it to dogs, He wasn't *calling her* a dog. The word He used wasn't the one they used to refer to the Gentiles as dogs. Instead, it's the word for a beloved pet. He wasn't using a racial slur. He was using a play on words to explain the focus of His ministry, test her faith, and teach His disciples an important lesson.^{xv}

Jesus wasn't insulting Gentiles. He spent most of His ministry reaching out to the outcasts and marginalized, challenging the Jews' prejudices and their social system of honor, status and power. The only reason He encountered this Canaanite woman at all was because He had intentionally gone to Tyre and Sidon, Gentile territory, which was far north of Galilee, where He usually preached (v. 21). A few chapters earlier, Jesus had pronounced woe to the Jews in the cities where He did the most of His miracles because they had not repented, saying if He had done those miracles in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented (Matthew 11:20–24). Jesus came to this area, even though His ministry was to Israel, knowing He would encounter Gentiles.^{xvi}

With His play on words, Jesus wasn't saying that *He* believed Gentiles were dogs. He was challenging *their* view of Jew and Gentile and testing her to see how she would respond. She showed she understood that even though she was not a child of Israel, she had value in the Master's eyes. She had the humility to accept whatever "crumbs" she could get and did not demand a place at the table, unlike the disciples, who argued over who was greatest.^{xvii} Jesus praised her for her great faith and healed her daughter instantly.

The disciples would have been dumbfounded. Jesus not only stopped and talked to her, He praised her for her faith and honored her request. He didn't ignore her, dismiss her, or shame her. He had a theological discussion with her and praised her answer! Jesus broke down racial, religious, cultural, social and gender barriers in this encounter. By healing her daughter, He gave the girl a new chance at life and a place in society. More importantly, He called this

mother a woman of great faith, implying that she was a disciple just as they were. Though the disciples might have considered her a dog, she would eat at the table with them in the kingdom of heaven. Like Jesus said of other Gentiles, this Canaanite woman showed more faith than many in Israel had shown. Entrance to the kingdom isn't based on social class, honor, heritage or anything other than faith in Jesus.

Q: In what surprising places and people have you seen faith?

Q: How does this passage challenge you to think differently about those on “the other side” from you, those your side may consider “dogs”? How would Jesus expect you to treat them?

Q: What cultural barriers do we need to break through to reach out to those who need Jesus?

Matthew 15:29–39 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Calming the sea proved that Jesus really was God. Only God could do that.

Q: How is this story like the feeding of the 5,000 (Matthew 14)? How is it different?

Q: Why would this story about crumbs left over be significant after the previous story?

This story is much like the feeding of the 5,000 from the previous chapter, but with some different details:

- Again, they were in a “desolate place” (v. 33) and Jesus provided for their hunger as God had done in the wilderness. But this time Jesus said the crowds had been with Him for three days (v. 32).
- Again, they had some bread and fish, but this time they had more food (seven loaves instead of five) and fewer people (4,000 instead of 5,000).
- Again, the disciples seemed to think in physical instead of supernatural terms. Even though they had watched Jesus heal large crowds of people for three days and had seen Him feed 5,000 people just one chapter before, they still asked where they would get enough bread to feed all of the people in such a desolate place (v. 33).
- Again, Jesus supplied more than enough, but this time seven baskets were left over instead of 12 (v. 37).
- Again, Jesus was moved with compassion for the people (v. 32). For three days, Jesus had met everyone else's needs, but He didn't talk about how tired He was or how He needed a break. His concern was for the people.

These details point to a difference between this same miracle being performed for Jews and for Gentiles. Feeding the 5,000 happened in a Jewish region and 12 baskets of leftovers were collected, symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel. This miracle took place in a Gentile region. Seven baskets were left over, symbolic of the seven Gentile nations, the seven nations of the

Canaanites in the land before the Conquest (Deuteronomy 7:1–2; Acts 13:19). Jesus intentionally performed this same miracle twice, once for the Jews and once for the Gentiles, to show that the kingdom of God was for all nations.^{xviii}

This reiterates the point Jesus had made in the previous story, with the Canaanite woman who was willing to take whatever scraps fell from the table of the kingdom of God. Keener writes that “figuratively in this context, the leftovers symbolize that plenty of ‘the children’s bread’ remains for other seekers.”^{xix} In the kingdom of God, there is really no such thing as people who can only eat the scraps that fall from the table. All are welcome at God’s table, Jew and Gentile (Matthew 22:2–14). Kings and prophets will sit next to lepers and notorious women. And there is no scarcity in the kingdom of God. God has more than enough to serve everyone to their fullest and have even more leftover (Ephesians 3:20).

Q: If everyone is welcome at God’s table, what does that say about what our tables should look like? How can we open our tables and our homes to those who are different from us and to the “least of these”?

Q: Though the Jew vs. Gentile distinction is not a primary one in our culture, what similar divisions and categories do we have today? How can we reach across those groups to love one another?

Q: How does it make you feel to see Jesus having such great compassion on people?

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Took

Main Point: In the Upside-Down Kingdom, your religion is not as important as your heart.

Consider how the disciples and Jesus varied in their response to the Canaanite woman. If you were in the shoes of the disciples, what advice would you have given Jesus? Do you profess a faith that is sacrificial toward others, preferring others and reaching them with the Gospel despite their background, race, likeability or financial situation? Do your actions support your professed faith? Refuse to be “house poor,” to profess one thing on the outside and have a real mess of a situation on the inside. Ask the Lord to make you pure of heart – that your heart would resemble His. Seek to be a Christian with no façade.

CHALLENGES

THINK: How can I show compassion on people the way Jesus did? Whom do I not see around me who needs love and care? How can I be the one to reach out to these people in love and meet their needs?

PRAY: For God to search your heart and reveal any places where your heart is not pure. You may even want to pray Psalm 139:23–24 as a prayer, “Search me, God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. See if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

ACT: Open Your Table. Sharing meals is one of the best ways to connect with people in any culture. Invite someone who is different from you to share a meal with you this week. If you can't bring people into your home, invite them to meet you somewhere. It doesn't have to be your table at your home to be “your table.” Hospitality is not about the place; it's the attitude of your heart. The important thing is inviting them, making them feel welcome, and intentionally spending time getting to know them and building relationship with them.

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- ⁱ <https://www.foxbusiness.com/real-estate/ahouse-poor-where-highest-rates-americans>
- ⁱⁱ Adele Berlin, "Cleanliness" *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)
Additional online article: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hand-washing/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 4b
- ^{iv} Rabbi Avraham ben Nathan Hayarhi, *Sefer Hamanhig, chapter "Halachot Se-udah"* (Jerusalem, 1970).
- ^v Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 4b
- ^{vi} Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Mikvaot 11:1*
- ^{vii} Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 19a
- ^{viii} Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 4b
- ^{ix} Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 4b
- ^x Jacob Neusner, *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973).
- ^{xi} E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1990).
- ^{xii} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).
- ^{xiii} C. G. Libolt, "Canaan" *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol 1* (Wm B Eerdmans, 1979).
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- ^{xv} Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Ancient Near East* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1965).
- ^{xvi} Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
- ^{xvii} Amy-Jill Levine, "The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History," *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, Vol 14* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988).
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- ^{xix} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).