

“According to Matthew”

A study of the Gospel of Matthew
Part 16: Traditions, Dogs and Bread.

Matthew paints for us a picture of Jesus as the Servant-king, the promised Messiah of Israel, the Son of God. His kingdom is not to be understood as an earthly domain but as a way of being that depends upon faith in God. Whilst this kingdom is governed by rules, the rules are not what you'd expect. The price of belonging to this kingdom is high.

King Jesus (whom our confessions call 'Lord') asks all, challenging His followers to abandon everything to the rule of His love, even those things that we hold most dear, even to the point of being prepared to take up a cross and carry it for His sake. Yet in return His promises outweigh His demands. 'My yoke is easy' He declares. In His service and in our abandonment to His will we are promised blessing and fulfillment.

The disciples have witnessed marvelous things, signs of 'exousia' the 'freedom giving power of Christ'. They have witnessed healing, exorcisms, forgiveness of sins, the stilling of storms, signs and wonders.

At the same time opposition is developing, particularly amongst those who hold the keys of power, both religious and secular. He challenges their authority, He treads on their toes and they don't like it. Chapters 12 through 14 show us how the resistance to Jesus was developing. In chapters 15 through 17 we see something of a theological turning point in Matthew's account of Jesus and His ministry.

Jesus message was rejected in the sense that people refused to commit themselves to it. It was not always the case that they strongly disagreed with it, or that they didn't understand it, they simply didn't act upon it. From here on in Matthew's gospel Jesus speaks more about the Cross and less about the kingdom. He lays out the way of life to be adopted by those who professed faith in Him.

Chapters 15 thru 17 also give us some puzzling scenarios. Why does Jesus call a foreign woman a dog? What exactly is the cross that disciples are called to bear? What did He mean by keys to his kingdom? These and other questions are all in the next three chapters.

Chapter 15 is, in many way, a recapping and a consolidation of what has gone before. It reiterates some of the principles of the kingdom we have already seen and talks much about faith as the necessary ingredient to be a citizen on Christ's new community. Chapter 15 offers us four sections; Tradition, Cleanliness, Faith, and the Feeding of the 4000. Let's look at the first of these;

Tradition

NIV Matthew 15:1 Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their

hands before they eat!" ³ Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' ⁵ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' ⁶ they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ⁸ "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules. '"

Traditions can be valuable things. Traditions can be like the stepping stones in a river that help us navigate a strongly flowing stream. Yet they can also be a snare that prevents us from experiencing new insights and fresh understandings. In the confrontation Jesus has with Pharisees and Teachers of the law, He points to something deeper than tradition, namely the attitude of the heart towards the rules and guidelines that religion offers to us. He chastises them for observing traditions that were insignificant whilst ignoring those that truly mattered.

They come to Him with something that they thought really mattered. Washing your hands before you eat. Now bear in mind, that for the lofty Pharisees and teachers, this had nothing to do with hygiene, but was a ceremonial act of piety. It was a way of indicating their separation from the common folk.

I recall seeing a skit on British Television (though I do not recall exactly what the show was) that had a character in it sitting at a table and announcing to the waiter "Good morning, I'm Mr. "Talk loudly in Restaurants so that everybody knows I'm important". Ceremonially washing hands was akin to saying grace in a loud voice in a public place so that everybody else knew that you were a person of significance. It was an act of self-promotion, rather than one designed to honor God.

Hand washing was not in fact part of the biblical regulations concerning ritual cleanliness. Priests were instructed in Exodus 30:17-21 to wash their hands and feet before ministering in the tabernacle, but that didn't apply to everyday eating. The tradition was one that had arisen only amongst the Pharisees.

However taking care of parents was commanded. "Honor thy Father and mother" was one of the 10 commandments. But the Pharisees were finding a way around it by declaring that their lives were 'devoted to God' and that they had made vows to serve God and God alone, and that this took precedence over the need to take care of their parents. Again this idea of vows making commandments meaningless was not something that had come from scripture but from the traditions of the Pharisees. They were more concerned with their traditions than the plain teaching of scripture.

William Barclay comments "Here is the clash and the collision; here is the contest between two kinds of religion and two kinds of worship. To the Scribes and Pharisees religion was the observance of certain outward rules and regulations and rituals, such as the correct way to wash hands before eating; it was the strict observance of a legalistic outlook on all life. To Jesus religion was a thing which had its seat in the heart; it was a thing which issued in compassion and kindness, which are above and beyond

the law.”

Christian faith can easily degenerate into something that it was never meant to be if legalism is allowed to take the upper hand. Whilst there are expected ways of behaving and we have accumulated over the centuries certain ways of doing things, we should never presume that just because 'that's the way we have always done it' that settles the issue. The ideals of love and acceptance of those who differ from us, the notion that we most honor God by honoring one another, needs to be over and above all rule keeping and observance of traditions. Particularly those traditions that have more to do with human regulation than scriptural counsel.

For instance we worship at 10:00 on a Sunday morning. We do so using an order of worship that is informed by centuries of theological insight and practice. We sing in a certain way using particular forms of music. We have our ways of standing and sitting, of coming in and going out. We have our annual calendar of events. And none of it is bad. But neither is it scriptural. These are our traditions, and they prove to be a wonderful guide, great stepping stones to lead us forward. But there are occasions when we may choose to do things in a different way, particularly if we do so to include others in our celebrations or to widen our ministry.

Maybe it's a case of not letting our preconceptions be a straight jacket that lead us to practices that become more of a help than a hindrance. I had a visit from George Kappelmann earlier this week. George, as you may know, likes to reflect and write poems. He had one he shared with me, that fits well with this passage, he titles 'Ideology'.

Ideology (by George Kappelmann - Jan 2010)

**'A mind that to an ideology bound
Can be virtually blind.
Decisions made without wisdom
Or factual considerations
Merely to conform
To pre-conceptions
Often problems accentuate
Rather than solutions make'**

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were allowing their ideology to dictate their theology, rather than allowing the scriptures to be the guide by which they formed their priorities. Having had this confrontation that touched upon ritual and cleanliness, it seems to have raised some questions in the minds of the folk who were listening in. Jesus uses the occasion to re-emphasize some of the teaching He had given in the sermon on the mount, again about religion being a matter of the heart. Read 10-21

Cleanliness

¹⁰ Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them." ¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when

they heard this?" ¹³ He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵ Peter said, "Explain the parable to us." ¹⁶ "Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. ¹⁷ "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?" ¹⁸ But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts--murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them." ²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

In the sermon on the mount Jesus speaks of external sinful actions such as murder, adultery, taking and breaking vows, unforgiving attitudes, wrong ways of praying and fasting and all kinds of anxiety as being rooted in the attitudes of the heart. Only an attitude of gratitude placed a person in the right latitude of love.

Here He talks of how it's not what goes into our mouths that should concern us, but what comes out of them. Elsewhere in Scripture the Book of James asks the question '*Who can control the tongue?*' and points out the dangers that the misuse of words can bring upon us. Ironically the disciples are concerned that what has come out of the mouth of Jesus has upset the Pharisees. 'Don't you know you offended them?' they ask Him.

People sometimes talk about the uncomfortable truth. Jesus had certainly confronted the Pharisees with His words. Yet being confronted by the truth was not a negative thing, but on the contrary a necessary thing. I think it's a danger that every person who stands up in a pulpit faces that there always is a temptation to never say anything that may offend somebody, or never deal with passages that make us uncomfortable. Fact is that sometimes we need to be offended by the word of God when it confronts an uncomfortable reality about who we really are or challenges our true motives.

Because that's what the new covenant is about . Attitudes of the heart. If you can change a person inside then everything else changes along with it. If you can change a persons motivation and focus then they become 'new'. One could almost describe such a change as being 'born again' as John does in his gospel. '**For out of the heart come evil thoughts--murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.**' Jesus connects wrong actions with wrong attitudes.

In the Old Testament the prophet Ezekial anticipates a new covenant relationship with God that would come to the people. ¹⁹ *I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.* (Ezekial 11:19-20 NIV).

Such is the kind of relationship that Paul, in the New Testament, would later explain that the coming of Jesus, and the sending of His Holy Spirit made possible in the life of a person who trusted in Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians he writes; '*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.*' (2Co 5:17-18 NIV)

The Pharisees? 'Well,' Jesus says about them, "Let the blind lead the blind". They were comfortable in their misconceptions and only wanted to get rid of Him. They desired only His downfall. The possibility, in their minds, that they might need to change, was beyond what they could handle. Their roots were in the wrong place. Their rules and regulations had little to do with God, but a whole lot to do with making them feel better about themselves. As long as they could dot the i's and cross the t's of their self-made laws they would continue to feel pretty pleased about themselves. And with such self-assurance it never occurred to them that they may be the ones in need of change.

Self satisfaction has a habit of doing that to us. We become convinced that everybody else needs to change, that the world would be a better place if everybody came around to embrace our minority opinion. And far from ever considering that we may be the ones in the wrong and not seeing the whole picture, we just become even more self righteous. 'Be careful' Jesus warns us. "Check the motivations of your heart. Don't seek only outward conformity, seek to be renewed from the inside out".

Jesus now departs and heads into Gentile territory where He will encounter a Canaanite woman with a daughter in need of help, something that at first, Jesus seems reluctant to respond to. Read 22 – 28.

Faith

22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." **23** Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." **24** He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." **25** The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. **26** He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." **27** "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." **28** Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

This is one of those passages where at first glance it seems Jesus is the one being taught a lesson rather than being the one with the answers.

One commentary describes the Canannite woman as an aggressive single parent who defies cultural taboos and acts to free Jesus from His sexism and racism. Catching Him in a bad mood and with His compassion down, she beats Him in an argument and so becomes the vehicle for His liberation and the deliverance of her daughter.

That's certainly one way of looking at it. But maybe we would be better served by going back to one of Matthew's constant themes, namely that of faith. In the previous passage Jesus has described Peter's faith as being dull. In Verse 15 -16 '**Peter said, "Explain the parable to us." "Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. ' The highpoint of this passage comes in verse 28 'Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment. '**

And far from being 'dull' the Canaanite woman seems intelligent, humorous and enlightened. She calls Jesus, 'Lord of David'. When the disciples seek to send her away she kneels before Jesus in an act of submission. When Jesus frames His ministry in terms that exclude her, and could even be seen as insulting, she plays with the words and talks about crumbs!

We should also remember that at this stage of the ministry of Jesus His mission truly is to the lost sheep of Israel. It is only later in the Book of Acts that the statement of Christianity being a religion that was to spread from '*Jerusalem, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth*' comes into play. Yet, that being said, throughout his gospel, Matthew keeps throwing in the idea (and after all we should not forget how radical such an idea would be to a Jewish audience) that the Messiah had come for all peoples.

We saw Him welcomed by wise men from afar. We saw the healing of a Roman Centurion's servant and Jesus declaring that the Roman soldier's faith went beyond that of any person He had seen in Israel. And now here He is, telling His disciples their faith had become dull and lifting up the faith of a Gentile woman as exemplary.

Jesus stating He was '*being sent to the lost sheep of Israel*' appears to be a statement of His purpose rather than a refusal to help. When faced with the woman's request it almost seems that He is trying to tease out of her exactly the response that she offers. "Look" He seems to ask, "You know I'm on a particular mission here, why should I abandon my guidelines and do something that's outside the box?" And the woman, almost playfully, suggests that not everything happens inside the box and that for all the world to be in glorious technicolor, sometimes you have to color outside the lines.

In response to the image Jesus offers of a '*dog*' and of '*bread*' she uses images of '*master*' and speaks of '*crumbs that fall from the table*'. In many ways this passage is setting us up (and maybe the disciples too) for what is to come next, which is the feeding of the four thousand, a miracle that takes place in the lands of the Gentiles rather than the previous miracle of the 5000 which was rooted firmly in Jewish territory.

It could be that this discourse between the woman and Jesus is more for the disciples' benefit (and those who would read it as members of the earliest, predominately Jewish church) than it is for the woman herself. However we interpret it, the outcome remains the same. Through faith in Jesus a woman's daughter finds healing. And in the process we are reminded that nobody is beyond the reach of the compassion of Jesus, even those we may consider beyond His touch!

And so our final passage, **the feeding of the 4000**, verses 29 thru 39.

29 Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. **30** Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. **31** The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. **32** Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." **33** His disciples answered, "Where

could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?" ³⁴ "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish." ³⁵ He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. ³⁶ Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. ³⁷ They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ³⁸ The number of those who ate was four thousand men, besides women and children. ³⁹ After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan. (Mat 15:1-39 NIV)

As we noted earlier the significance of the feeding of the 4000 is that we are here in Gentile territory. William Barclay locates this feeding as being at the center of 'the Decapolis'; a federation of 10 Gentile cities.

He also picks up on the fact the word used for baskets is in this passage is '*sphuris*' as opposed to that of '*kophinoi*', the word used for basket in the feeding of the 5000. He comments; 'The *kophinos* was a narrow-necked, flask shaped basket which Jews often carried with them, for a Jew often carried his own food, lest he should be compelled to eat food which had been touched by Gentile hands and was therefore unclean. The *sphuris* was much more like a hamper; it could be big enough to carry a man, and it was the kind of basket that a Gentile would use'

In a chapter that begins with a debate about ritual cleanliness it is fascinating to see how it closes with a reference to the kind of baskets that could lay Jews open to the charge of being ritually unclean. Such is part of the genius of Matthew, the way themes keep re-appearing in unexpected ways! That we are in Gentile territory is also restated in verse 31 where we read that '**The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.**'

Some commentators draw attention to the fact that when Matthew uses numbers there is always something more going on than just mathematics. Numbers are used as symbols rather than representing actual figures.

The number 5 was thought to represent grace. The number 10 to represent perfection or completion. So in the feeding of the 5000 the grace of God to complete the mission of Israel was symbolized.

The number 7 was thought to represent the completion of God's work (as in the 7 days of creation). The number 4 was thought to be associated with God's creative work. So in the feeding of the 4000 by 7 loaves Matthew is indicating that following the mission to the Jews, the mission '*To Samaria and all the ends of the earth*' would take place.

All of which is a roundabout way of saying that there are things we may never understand about the way Matthew wrote his gospel and that if we read too many commentaries we may end up with more questions than answers. But I find it all fascinating stuff nonetheless! And it does reinforce the idea that one of Matthew's aims was to tell his Jewish readership that the kingdom of God would be something more than they ever had dreamed of.

William Barclay mentions in his commentary how in three significant stages of His ministry Jesus ends each stage by setting a meal before people.

"First there was the feeding of the 5000; that came at the end of His ministry in Galilee, for Jesus was never to teach and preach and heal in Galilee again. Second there was this feeding of the 4000. This came at the end of His brief ministry to the Gentiles, beyond the bounds of Palestine - first in the districts of Tyre and Sidon and then in the Decapolis. Third and last, there was the Last Supper in Jerusalem, when Jesus came to the final stage of the days of His flesh.

... Jesus always left people with strength for the way; always He gathered people to Him to feed them with living bread. Always He gave Himself before He moved on. And still He comes to us offering us also the bread which will satisfy the immortal hunger of the human soul, and in the strength of which we shall be able to go all the days of our life."

In chapters 16 and 17 we will reach some turning points in the gospel according to Matthew. We will hear less about the Kingdom, more about the Cross. We shall hear some clear statements about the life and purpose of Christ's life through both mountain top experiences and disciples declarations.