



Group Discussion Guide

For group meetings from December 6 afternoon through December 13 morning

Matthew 15:1-9

A delegation of religious leaders was sent from Jerusalem to where Jesus was ministering in the region of Galilee, to question his practice of Judaism. They focused their attack on his disciples, who they claimed were breaking tradition by not practicing ceremonial handwashing before they ate. This was not a violation of the Mosaic law, but rather a violation of rabbinical tradition. Jesus chose not to answer their question, and instead responded with an accusation of his own. He asked them why they broke God's commandment to honor their father and mother, and in doing so leveled a greater accusation at them than they had at him and his disciples. He accused them of breaking a law of God, as opposed to a man-made tradition. This note explains how some within Judaism broke this commandment and thus revealed the state of their hearts:

Jesus showed how these religious leaders had in effect nullified this commandment (Matt. 15:6). They could simply affirm that a particular item had been a gift devoted to God. Then the item could not be used by an individual but was kept separate. This was simply a clever way of keeping things from passing to one's parents. The person would of course continue to keep those things in his own home where they had been supposedly set aside for God. Such action was condemned by Jesus as being hypocritical (v. 7), for while it appeared to be spiritual, it actually was done to keep one's possessions for himself. Thus this failure to help one's parents deliberately violated the fifth commandment of the Decalogue. Such action had been described by Isaiah centuries before (Isa. 29:13). Their religion had become a matter of action and man-made rules. Their hearts were far from God and consequently their worship was in vain.

Louis A. Barbieri Jr., "Matthew," in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 55.

Matthew 15:10-20

Jesus used his encounter with the scribes and Pharisees to teach a valuable lesson to others who were present. He said, "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person," (v. 11). His disciples were concerned about Jesus possibly offending the Pharisees, but Jesus told them the Pharisees were "blind guides" (v. 14) and not worth their concern. The disciples then asked him to explain the parable about what defiles a person. Jesus taught them that food moves through the digestive system and eventually the body removes what is not used. Food is a means to an end and does not make a person unclean, rather what is in the heart is what makes a person unclean. The heart is the origin of evil thoughts that can eventually become evil words and deeds.

Matthew 15:21-39

Jesus left the region of Galilee and traveled into Gentile territory, where he encountered a Gentile woman who came to him and asked him to intervene in the life of her daughter, who was oppressed by a demon. Interestingly enough, Jesus ignored her. His disciples then came to him and asked him to “send her away” (v. 23), seemingly in the hopes he would just do what she requested so she would leave. However, Jesus told them his mission was to reach the people of Israel, indicating he would not help her because she was a Gentile. The woman then came closer to Jesus, knelt in front of him and asked him again to help her. Once again, his response is somewhat unexpected. He said, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs,” (v. 26). Jesus was telling her that his mission was to reach Israel first. The Jewish people were still the ones chosen by God to shine his light to the world, and it would be through this nation that salvation would eventually be made available to all people ... Jew and Gentile alike. No doubt his reference to Gentiles as “dogs” seems very unlike Jesus. One possible explanation of this is that Jesus may have been using this comparison in a way that somewhat mocked the common Jewish opinion of Gentiles; that he was not serious in using this comparison. Without the ability to hear his tone of voice or see his facial expression, this of course would be lost anyone reading Matthew’s account. Another possibility is that Jesus made this comparison to test the faith of this Gentile woman; to see how she would respond to a potential challenge to her request. If Jesus was serious in his comparison, we have to trust there was a reason for this even if we don’t fully understand it. When the woman responded with humility rather than contempt and was content to receive the “crumbs” from Jesus, he acknowledged the strength of her faith and granted her request. Her daughter was healed.

Jesus returned to the Sea of Galilee and large crowds of people came to him. They brought those who were sick and afflicted by various physical conditions, and he healed them. The result was that more people were amazed by Jesus, and they glorified God. This chapter closes with a miracle similar to the feeding of the large group in chapter 14. The compassion of Jesus led him to provide food for all those who had gathered, and once again he multiplied a small amount of food to feed thousands ... with seven baskets of food left over.

Discussion Questions

1. Once again, Jesus emphasizes relationships over man-made religious practices. How has this message changed your perspective about this as you've read through Matthew?
2. Jesus confronts the Pharisees about their hypocrisy as he quotes Isaiah 29:13. How does his very direct challenge to them also challenge you in your life right now?
3. According to Jesus, what defiles a person? With this understanding of sin, how then do we become righteous; how are we cleansed? And what does this mean for living out our faith ... living in obedience to God?
4. Why do you think Jesus responded to the Canaanite woman in the way he did? How does her faith inspire you?
5. When the crowds of people witnessed Jesus heal the sick and afflicted, they glorified God. How are you pointing other people to God to help them glorify Him?
6. Are you surprised that the disciples again asked Jesus how they were going to feed thousands of people, when they had recently witnessed him do just that? Why or why not?
7. How are you moved by Jesus' compassion for the people and his willingness to meet their physical need?