

# Matthew 15 – A Commentary

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## Introduction

The events described in the beginning of Matthew 15 took place in Galilee, where Jesus was attracting throngs of people by His mighty words and deeds. News of His miracles had spread “from Dan to Beersheba” (and even further), reaching the ears of jealous officials in Jerusalem who sought Him out in order to discredit him before the people, if possible.

## Jesus Receives a Question and Gives an Answer Verses 1-9

### Verses 1-2:

That the Pharisees and scribes would travel from Jerusalem to confront Christ well indicates their bitterness toward Him. They were the religious leaders, the ones about whom the multitudes should be talking and following, rather than this Nazarene! The exact history of the Pharisees is unknown. The sect apparently began in the intertestamental period among those who were zealous of the Law in the face of the encroachments of Gentile influences. The scribes (sometimes referred to as "doctors" and "lawyers") were those who primarily were employed in copying the Old Testament scrolls.

Both of these groups were obviously also zealous of the "traditions of the elders." They held that Moses not only received the written Law at Sinai, but additional oral instructions, as well. They taught that Moses communicated the “traditions to Joshua and that they were further transmitted through the judges, the kings, and the prophets until they could be written down and collected in their *Talmud*. These traditions consisted of thousands of rules and commands, many of them ridiculous beyond measure, which the Pharisees and scribes nonetheless valued more highly than they did the Law itself when they gave them an advantage or when the “traditions” conflicted with the Law (as Jesus indicated in His conversation with them). The parallel between the Pharisees’ approach to authority in religion and that of the Roman Catholic Church is astounding, as the latter institution exists by relying upon the “authority” of oral tradition over the Word of God.

The question the Pharisees asked Jesus concerned one of these traditions, which taught that if one ate food without washing his hands it would defile him. They had seen Jesus' disciples eat without washing, thus transgressing their revered tradition and giving them what they hoped would be a damaging charge against the Lord.

### ***Verses 3–6:***

As He often did in response to a question, so He did here — He asked a question of His querists. As always, the Lord's questions went straight to the heart of the issue: their fallacy of elevating human tradition above the Commandment of God. This charge (and the supporting evidence for it) simultaneously exposed their inconsistency, their hypocrisy, and the times principle — the vanity of relying upon human authority in religion. For the moment Christ turned aside from the issue of defilement to address the larger issue of authority.

Jesus cited the mistreatment of aged parents as evidence of their exaltation of oral tradition over the Law of God. The commandment of God was that children were to honor their parents (Exo. 20:12) and that one who cursed his parents was to be put to death (21:17). However, the traditions of the elders allowed one to declare a part of one's estate as dedicated to God (i.e., "given to God," or "Corban" [Mark 7:11])<sup>1</sup> with the claim that this was that which could have benefited one's parents had it not been so dedicated. This tradition thus "legally" released one from his responsibility to provide for helpless and aged parents, all the while, allowing loveless and covetous children to spend such funds as they pleased. It gave one an excuse not to honor them and in practicality it allowed one to curse them by neglect of their needs. By this powerful illustration the Lord proved that they made void the Commandment of God by their tradition.

### ***Verses 7–9:***

Jesus followed His serious charge of elevating human tradition over Divine Law with a severe tongue-lashing of these self-righteous religionists. After calling them "hypocrites," He quoted the scathing words Isaiah had spoken to their fathers seven centuries before: "This people honoreth me with their lips; But their heart is far from me" (Isa. 29:11a), but which Jesus said were also prophetic of those in His midst.

The words of rebuke contain two elements. First, their hypocrisy lay in the fact that they were religious in appearance only while inwardly they cared not for God. They did their religious exercises to be praised of men, rather than to please God (Mat. 6:1–18). Indeed, God requires more than merely "going through the motions" — even if our "motions" are those prescribed by Scripture. Our hearts must be in the worship we offer to God.

Second, their worship to God was rendered vain (worthless, of no value) because their religion was based upon human rather than Divine authority. From the beginning God has

recognized and accepted only those acts of worship which He authorized. It is utterly ridiculous to assume (as so many do) that God is somehow obligated to accept whatever men choose to offer Him. Those tradition-bound, pretentious Jews violated both qualifications of true worship as stated by the Lord – that it must be offered “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). They worshiped not “in spirit” because their hearts were far from God, and they worshiped not “in truth” because their acts were based on human rather than Divine Law. One cannot love God and His Son much who seeks to excuse and justify any act of worship (or other behavior) not authorized by the Word of God.

### **Jesus Addresses the Multitude Verses 10-20**

#### ***Verses 10-11:***

Although this brief statement on that which does and does not defile a man is not usually classed with the parables, Peter so denominated it (v. 15). We may appropriately call it “The Parable of Defilement.” Notice that Jesus turned his attention (and probably the direction of His face) to “the multitude” and away from the corrupt Pharisees and scribes he had been addressing. This indicates that there was likely a large crowd surrounding Jesus during His encounter with those religious leaders.

He called the crowd closer to Him, telling them to “hear and understand” what He was about to say. What He said in this parable indicated that just as there was no basis in the Law of God for this tradition of the Pharisees concerning defilement, neither was there a physical basis for it; mere physical “dirt” could not cause moral or spiritual defilement.

#### ***Verses 12-14:***

It seems almost as if the disciples interrupted Jesus' lesson on defilement by calling attention to the offended Pharisees. They were offended by the things He had said to them and about them. He exposed their disloyalty to God's Law, calling them “hypocrites” and pronouncing their religion “vain.” Yes, they were offended! The way the disciples learned that the Pharisees were offended we are not informed. At least a mild rebuke of the Lord seems to be implied in the disciples' question. Their statement revealed their spiritual immaturity.

They were more concerned with the feelings of a pack of wolves than with the Truth. They were governed by emotion rather than by reason. They were worried more about projecting a favorable “image” in the eyes of the opinion-makers of the day than they were about pleasing God. They were actually suggesting that Jesus “tone down” His message so that it might not offend those men of repute from Jerusalem! If the disciples (likely a reference to the

apostles in this context) were ruled by such carnal thinking, it should not surprise us to find the same thinking among modern-day saints. Indeed, it is far too frequently seen. We see it in the loud cry to be only "positive" in our preaching and teaching. We see it in the harsh criticism of those who would dare expose false doctrine and name the religious body or the brother who teaches it. We see it in the severe "image consciousness" of so many elderships and congregations. We see it in the almost feverish effort by some preachers to send everyone forth from the assembly "feeling good about themselves."

Many preachers are so fearful of offending a sinner that the sinner leaves knowing neither what he should do nor that he needs to do anything to be reconciled to God. This business of inoffensiveness has become such an obsession with many that they have surrendered the distinctiveness of the Truth in favor of it. Probably every Gospel preacher who is determined to preach the "whole counsel of God" has heard the suggestion more than once that he dull the sharp edge of the sword of the Spirit just a bit now and then lest it cut too deeply. We can be thankful that the Peter and the other apostles on Pentecost were not of this disposition, so preaching that the crucifiers of the Lord were "cut to the heart" by their wielding of the two-edged spiritual sword. None should ever be unnecessarily harsh, unkind, or offensive in proclaiming the Truth, of course. However, some are so fearful of causing even the slightest offense to the most sensitive souls or hardened sinners that they obscure Truth and leave these lost ones with false hopes. Such behavior reflects greater fear of men than of our Master, who will judge us at last (John 12:48).

Jesus' response to the disciples concerning the offended Pharisees is most instructive. Instead of running to the Pharisees and falling all over them with apologies for the Truth He had spoken, He set forth two principles designed to correct the thinking of the disciples. If the Pharisees were in earshot of these words to the disciples, they must have been hyper-offended upon hearing them.

The first principle Jesus stated employed an agricultural motif. The skilled gardener will rid his garden of all but his own plants, grown from the seeds he planted. Accordingly, only those things "planted" by God will remain; He will sooner or later uproot all others. This principle applies particularly to religion. The doctrines and practices of the Pharisees were things planted by men—not by God—and they would eventually be pulled up by their roots. This fate awaits all religious doctrines and the systems built upon them that did not originate

with God. Every pagan religion and all those institutions founded by men and filled with deceived professed believers fall under the Lord's edict.

The only religious message originated and authorized by God for this age is the Gospel, as Paul declared: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation..." (Rom. 1:16a). All others are doomed to destruction sooner or later. The church of Christ is the only religious body originated and authorized by God since the Cross, and regardless of how men may reject her and despise her, she is the "kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:28); all others are predestined to failure and eventual perdition. We have no right whatsoever to compromise this principle by leaving the impression that the religious doctrines and institutions of men are, after all, acceptable to God. Christ will save only His body (Eph. 5:23), the church He built (Mat. 16:18) and purchased with His blood (Acts 20:28). All other religious "plants" are predestined for destruction, regardless of their seeming invincibility in time.

The second principle Jesus enunciated was based on the motif of leadership. He granted that the Pharisees were guides or leaders, but He pronounced them "blind." He did not refer to physical, but to spiritual blindness. Since they were blind, they were stumbling around in spiritual darkness themselves and would inevitably fall into a "pit." This sad result is comparable to the uprooting of the plant in the previous principle; it is a pronouncement of certain doom upon those who oppose the Son of God and His Word. The certainty of their own doom would be tragic enough, but much worse still, all who followed those blind leaders would stumble right into the pit of destruction with them. Were the implications of this principle not so foreboding and horrible, the picture painted by the Lord would be humorous — blind men out in front of a crowd of blind folk being led they know not where by ones who know not where they are going! Later, the Lord expanded on the blindness of these same religious leaders (Mat. 23:16-22).

Every false teacher — in whatever period of time — has been/is a "blind guide" headed for the bottomless pit of Hell, and he will take down with him the gullible souls who swallow his human doctrines. This judgment is true of false teachers and their followers both within and without the body of Christ. Think for a moment of the horrible fate of Mohammed, the popes of Rome, Joseph Smith, Charles Taze Russell, and the likes of Oral Roberts, Jim Bakker, and Jimmy Swaggart who have been and continue to be "blind guides" of blind multiplied millions. It will be no better for any of the leaders among the elect who have apostatized (many of whom could

be named) and destroyed the faith of their brethren, whether in congregations or in educational institutions. Let us redouble our commitment to be true to Christ and His Word ourselves and to persuade as many followers as possible of those "blind guides" to follow the only Guide from earth to Heaven (John 14:6).

What did the Lord mean by the charge, *Let them alone*? Some (even among the brethren) have asserted that He meant that we should not oppose false teachers. This could not be His meaning unless one is willing to affirm that His teaching here was inconsistent with His constant practice. His entire preaching life was a running confrontation with false teachers and their damnable doctrines. Moreover, the Word of Christ, both by precept and example, teaches us to oppose false ways and men who propagate them (Acts 7:51–53; 13:9–11; Gal. 2:11; Eph. 5:11; Tit. 1:9–11; Jude 3; et al.). With the comments of J.W. McGarvey on this command of the Lord, I heartily agree:

Let them alone, not in the way of ceasing to expose their errors, but in the sense of making no effort to appease them. The disciples were to be regardless of them as Jesus was, making no change in either the matter or manner of discourse for their sake. Sometimes the best way to move men is to be totally indifferent to them; and when men stand opposed to the truth from corrupt motives, the only possible chance to do them good is to offend them, for when you please them you only confirm them in their wicked ways.<sup>2</sup>

#### ***Verses 15–16:***

As usual, Peter, the first to ask a question or offer an opinion, requested from the Lord an explanation of the parable. After the parable of the sower (Mat. 13:3–8) – the first employment of this form of teaching – Jesus had given a detailed application without its being requested (Mat. 13:18–23). He immediately spoke three additional parables to the multitude (of which His disciples were a part), including those of the tares, the mustard seed, and the leaven (vv. 24–33). After Jesus left the crowd, the disciples asked Him to explain the parable of the tares, which he did without hesitation or rebuke for their lack of understanding (vv. 36–43). He followed this explanation with three more parables (the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, and the dragnet [vv. 44–50]), after which He asked them if they understood their meaning, and to which they replied, "Yea" (v. 51). They thereby indicated that they were now able to follow the application principles to His parables without further specific explanation.

The request of Peter for an explanation of the parable of defilement provoked a rebuke from the Lord for the lack of understanding it evinced in the apostles. It appears that Jesus thereby indicated that He felt that, after having heard Him teach in so many parables, after

having guided them through the application of the first two and after testing them about their understanding of the others, there was no excuse for their not understanding this one as well. Jesus' rebuke is reminiscent of the words of Hebrews 5:12:

For when by reason of the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need again that some one teach you the rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of solid food.

If the Lord spoke directly to His people now, He would surely ask of a people who have so many Bibles and so many opportunities to learn, but who toil under the self-imposed curse of Biblical illiteracy and consequent spiritual immaturity, "Are ye also even yet without understanding?" Peter's question is a second demonstration of the disciples' spiritual immaturity in this context.

***Verses 17–20:***

Jesus answered by drawing a clear distinction between the physical and spiritual parts of man. As a general principle, food for man's physical body, taken into the mouth and passing on through the digestive system, did not cause the spiritual or moral part of man to be unclean. (The Lord doesn't deny that contaminated food can cause physical illness, for that is not in the purview of His point.) There were indeed certain animals that were unlawful for the Jews to eat at any (e.g., pork) and leaven could not be eaten at a specified time (i.e., the Passover feast). However, Jesus' parable does not pertain to what the Law said about clean and unclean **foods**, but to what the traditions of the elders had bound concerning clean and unclean **hands**. I further observe that it would be a gross perversion of Scripture to seek justification for the consumption of beverage alcohol or the use of tobacco or other harmful substances on the basis of the Lord's words here. One might as consistently argue for consumption of arsenic or strychnine.

Further, Jesus was not arguing against the practice of good hygiene nor encouraging bodily filth. His point was that spiritual or moral defilement could not be caused by ingesting a little physical dirt that might be clinging to one's hands when he ate. Conversely, His point also was that spiritual or moral purity was not assured merely by being careful **not** to eat with dirty hands. These wicked Pharisees and scribes were hypocritically concerned with clean hands when they should have been alarmed about their polluted hearts, as He later explicitly exposed and condemned in them (Mat. 23:25–28).

The things (words) that proceed out of the mouth defile one spiritually and morally, for they indicate that their source, the heart, is defiled. On a previous occasion of exposing the wicked Pharisees, the Lord told them, "...Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Mat. 12:34). The "heart" here is man's will, his decision-making faculty, thus his mind. The first sign of such corruption He listed was "evil thoughts," because they are the fountain from which all evil words and deeds flow. All the wicked things one may do to God, to his neighbor, or to himself are summarized in Jesus' list of misdeeds. They all begin as thoughts in the heart and then find fruition as works of the flesh (Gal. 5: 19–21). Solomon's inspired wisdom stated as much a millennium earlier, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Pro. 4:23). It is still essential that the people of God remember his dictum. How often ought we to pray as well as to sing, "Purer in heart, O God, help me to be."

With this treatise the Lord logically and powerfully exposed the absurdity of the Jews' contention for the handwashing tradition. Doubtless, this encounter not only offended them. but embarrassed and infuriated them, adding further fuel to the fire of hatred already smoldering in their hearts toward the Lord. His teaching here was not only combative and practical, but prophetic. The evil thoughts and hatred in the hearts of those scribes and Pharisees would eventually erupt, causing them to murder the Son of God.

### **Jesus Retires to Tyre and Sidon Verses 21–28**

#### ***Verses 21–22:***

Various commentators suggest that Jesus left His homeland at this time to (1) escape the wrath of the Pharisees whom He had just offended, (2) escape the wrath of Herod, (3) find a place where He could escape the throngs of people which His miracles had attracted, (4) provide an opportunity to further teach the apostles without interruption, (5) or provide an opportunity for a Gentile to receive His blessing, thus typifying the salvation of the Gentiles through the Gospel. Since the inspired Record does not tell us why this journey was undertaken, it is vain to speculate. It is possible that a combination of these motives precipitated this journey.

The area into which Jesus and the apostles entered was the land of Phoenicia, dominated by the ancient and renowned cities of Tyre and Sidon on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Like all of Syria, it was under the rule of Rome. A "Canaanitish woman" approached Jesus with a request for her daughter. The Phoenicians were descendants of Canaan, the grandson of Noah (Gen. 10:6,19), and they were never displaced during Israel's conquest and settling of



Canaan. Mark described the woman as a "Greek" (i.e., a "Gentile") and a "Syrophoenician" (i.e., a Syrian who lived in Phoenicia [Mark 7:26]). By use of these terms it is clear that she was neither by race nor residence a Jew.

The woman came crying after Jesus with a plea for her daughter who was "grievously vexed" by a demon that possessed her. It is remarkable that she addressed Jesus as "Lord, thou son of David," the latter phrase clearly a Messianic title. From whence had she learned of His power and had come to believe in Him as the Messiah? For some time the miraculous works and the marvelous teaching and preaching of the Lord had been known in a wide area. Matthew earlier explained: "And the report of him went forth into all Syria: and they brought unto him all that were sick, holden with divers diseases and torments, possessed with demons, and epileptic and palsied; and he healed them" (4:24). We should not then be surprising that this woman knew who Jesus was and that He had demonstrated the power to rid her daughter of the demon.

#### ***Verses 23-26:***

In response to the woman's request, the Lord was totally silent, a striking departure from His usual practice. The disciples then asked Jesus to send her away, "for she crieth after us." Some have suggested that they selfishly wanted the Lord to "chase her off" without fulfilling her request. However, the Lord's reply to the apostles suggests the opposite. They were apparently pleading the case of the woman and asking Him to fulfill her request, thereby sending her away. Otherwise, I fail to see why the Lord would argue to the apostles that He was not sent to serve Gentiles, but only "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." While their plea doesn't imply that they asked the Lord to get rid of her for selfish reasons, it is possible that they were also concerned about His comfort and leisure.

The woman seemingly was crying after Christ at a "distance," but came closer and "worshipped" Him. We are not told what the specific act was that is called "worship," but it was necessarily something she did and was not doing before. The description of this woman's "worshipping" the Lord would be nonsensical if everything a person does 24 hours a day (from taking a shower to mowing the grass) is "worship," as some erroneously (and absurdly) contend. This occasion is one of many that proves that not everything a person does is worship, but that worship consists of specific, purposeful acts of homage and reverence.

To her plaintive plea, "Lord, help me," He responded by saying that it would not be appropriate to take the bread meant for children and feed it to the dogs (Mark 7:27 makes it

clear that these words were addressed to the woman rather than to the disciples). It could not have gone unnoticed by the woman that in Jesus' response to her the "children" were the Jews and the "dogs" were Gentiles, such as herself.

***Verses 27–28:***

A person of lesser faith would have been rebuffed and offended at the Lord's statement, but she demonstrated the depth and desperation of her faith by her response. She did not argue whether the Gentiles were "dogs" or "non-dogs"; rather, she accepted the Jew-Gentile relationship as described by the Lord and made a persuasive argument on it. She pointed out that it is common practice for dog owners to allow dogs to eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' tables. She was only a dog begging for a mere crumb! Her statement indicated not only her humility, but also her belief that the Lord's power was so great that fulfilling her request would be merely a "crumb" compared to His capabilities.

Jesus replied with a statement of astonishment and admiration concerning her faith. It is interesting to observe that on an earlier occasion Jesus had marveled at the faith of the Roman centurion in Capernaum who came to Him with a request for his beloved servant (Mat. 8:10). Both of these remarkable cases of faith were found in Gentiles. This woman had not let any obstacle, hurdle, or discouraging circumstance deter her from her goal. Let it be noticed that hers was an acting, doing, working faith—the only kind of faith that lives, avails, and is productive (Jam. 2:20–26). Those who seek the grand prize of salvation should take heed. Just as this woman would not have received her great blessing by “faith alone,” neither shall any be granted their salvation by merely believing in Christ. Jesus said, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16a). Further, the faith of many who have obeyed the Gospel has proved to be shallow by their inactivity in the Lord’s service. Many others have evinced a shallow faith by their desertion of the Lord and His church at the first perceived offense, trial, opposition, or discouragement. This woman provided a model of faith for all to follow.

Having acclaimed the woman's faith, the Lord then told her that her request was granted—her daughter was released from the demon that possessed her. Matthew reported that the girl was healed “from that hour” (Mat. 15:28). Mark added that when the woman returned to her house she found her daughter upon the bed, now free from the demon (Mark 7:30). How amazing was the power of the Lord, even over the demonic minions of Satan.

In this miraculous setting, it is appropriate to summarize some of the characteristics of the miracles of Christ. The Lord did not have to be present with the one in need of healing, as in

this case. He did not have to touch the one in need of healing. The miracles of the Lord did not depend upon the faith of the one (or thing) upon which the miracle was wrought. (The mother had great faith, but if the little girl had any faith we are not told. It is certain that the water had no faith to become wine [John 2:7-10], and the weather had no faith to change from storm to calm [Mark 4:39].) Those whom the Lord healed did not gradually get better after several weeks of hospitalization, surgery, therapy, and medication, but were made whole "on the spot." Furthermore, Jesus never failed in His miraculous deeds. All of these facts concerning the miraculous power of Christ reveal how dishonest and deceptive the self-proclaimed "miracle-workers" past the first century – including those of the present – really are.

The typical implications of this occurrence deserve our notice. It was true (as Jesus told the apostles) that He came to work and teach among the Jews (so as to prepare as many of them as possible for His soon-to-come kingdom [Mat. 4:17]). However, the effect of His work would result in benefits for all men, including the vast Gentile world. When Jesus healed the Gentile centurion's servant and exclaimed over his great faith, He immediately made the point that many (like this one Gentile) from all over the world would be in the heavenly kingdom with the saints of old while the evil "sons of the kingdom" (Jews) would be cast out (8:1-12).

Jesus' granting of the request of this Gentile woman thus prefigured the great spiritual blessings that He would make available for all the Gentiles through His death and the proclamation of the Gospel. Surely, the apostles must have thought back on this episode more than once in later years as the church became increasingly filled with Gentiles, who eventually proved more receptive to the Gospel than were/are the Jews.

### **Jesus Heals Many Near the Sea of Galilee Verses 29-31**

When Jesus and the apostles departed from Phoenicia they returned to the environs of the Sea of Galilee. Mark more fully described the route they took, stating that they journeyed from the area of Tyre, northward through Sidon, then eastward (probably across the mountains north of Galilee) into Decapolis (east of the Sea of Galilee [Mark 7:31]). Some believe that this latter area was the same area as the "country of the Gadarenes" (Gergesenes, KJV) where Jesus had cast out the demons from the two men into the herd of swine, causing the inhabitants of the area to ask Jesus to depart from them (Mat. 8:28-34).<sup>3</sup> If this were the case, then the country would likely have been occupied largely by Gentiles, although some argue that they were Jews, but somewhat estranged by geography from their brethren in Palestine proper.<sup>4</sup> Upon arrival,

Jesus "went up into the mountain" (perhaps the modern "Golan Heights") "and sat there," maybe not indicating so much His bodily posture as His residing there for a period of time.<sup>5</sup> He was there for at least three days after the multitude assembled (see v. 32), and we may assume for some time before to allow news to travel sufficiently to draw the many that came together.

The word of Jesus' arrival and of His ability spread rapidly because He apparently was not in this place long before "great multitudes" were attracted to Him. People with all sorts of physical ailments (four types are specified, besides "many others") were brought to Jesus to be healed. They were all healed, whether dumb, maimed,<sup>6</sup> lame, blind, or whatever malady they had. Once more we observe that nothing was too hard for the Lord – He did not fail!

The power Jesus demonstrated among these people caused them to be amazed, "and they glorified the God of Israel." This phrase would seem to indicate that these were Gentiles, who, by living in close proximity to the Jews, were acquainted with their religion enough to know something about their God. They rightly attributed the power of Jesus – whom they knew to be a Jew – to God, realizing that no man could do those things of his own power.

In this result we see the ultimate aim of the miraculous activity of Jesus. It was not merely to cause wonderment nor to draw crowds nor even to relieve suffering, but to so demonstrate the power of God that He was glorified, and that Jesus was thereby proved to be God's messenger. His message was that He was the only begotten Son of God and came to be the Savior of the world (John 3:16; Luke 19:10; et al.). John well summarized this aim of Jesus' signs and wonders:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

Those who credit the primary purpose of Jesus' miracles to any lesser aim have missed the mark. It would be foolish to deny the compassion He had for the sufferings of the multitude of people He healed (see below), but He could have stayed in Heaven and done this through men or angels. Moreover, those who mistake the primary purpose of Jesus' work likewise unfailingly mistake the primary work in which the spiritual body of Christ, the church, must ever be engaged – that of proclaiming the pure Gospel to the lost multitudes so that their souls may be saved (Mat. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47).

## **Jesus Feeds More Than 4,000 Verses 32-39**

### ***Verses 32-34:***

Jesus somehow was able to so call the apostles apart from the crowd that He could speak with them privately. He told them of His concern for the physical needs of the host of people who had been gathered there now for three days without eating. He feared that if they tried to make the journey to their homes without nourishment they might faint on the way. Some of them were far from their homes (Mark 8:3). The compassion of Jesus for these people, although they were strangers to Him, was typical of the consistent motivation for all that He did. From leaving Heaven to giving Himself up to His crucifiers, He did all things out of compassion and love for fallen mankind. The greatness of the amazement of this throng of people at Jesus' mighty works is demonstrated in that they set aside the powerful appetite for food for three days in their desire to miss none of them.

We are made to marvel at the faithlessness of the apostles as indicated by their answer to Jesus. They indicated that they had no idea where they could get enough food to feed such a crowd in an uninhabited place. Seemingly, they learned little from the feeding of the 5,000 plus, of which they had been a part not too long before (Mat. 14:13-21). For that matter, even if the feeding of the 5,000 had not preceded this occasion, it should have occurred to them that one who could do the mighty acts of healing they had been witnessing now for three days (to say nothing of the countless miracles they had seen Him perform on other occasions) would have no difficulty supplying ample food for this multitude. They were not unlike the Israelites for whom God opened the Red Sea for their safe passage from slavery and destruction, but who in a short while would forgetfully murmur when they grew thirsty, inquiring, "Is Jehovah among us or not?" (Exo. 17:7). How the little faith of the twelve must have taxed the patience of the Lord time after time (Mat. 8:26; 14:31; et al.). However, the Lord gave no notice of any impatience He may have felt with them here.

When Jesus asked them how much food they had, the apostles could only produce seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. We are not told the source of this food, whether from the apostles themselves, or from others, as in the case of the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:9). Although the quantity of food available was greater this time than before (seven as opposed to five loaves and "a few" as opposed to two fish [Mat. 14:19]), and the number of people was fewer (4,000 plus as opposed to 5,000 plus, [v. 21]), still the manifestation of supernatural power was unquestionable to feed so many from so little.

### **Verses 35–39:**

As in the previous similar miracle, the people were commanded to be seated (Mat. 14:19). Then, taking the meager quantity of food, Jesus gave thanks for it, broke it into smaller pieces (perhaps individual servings), and gave it to the disciples for distribution. This is one of many times where Jesus is described as giving thanks before eating (Mat. 14:19; Luke 22:17; 24:30). He teaches us by His noble example just what Paul teaches us by precept, namely, that our food is to be "received with thanksgiving" (1 Tim. 4:4).

It is noteworthy that in the feeding of the 5,000 Matthew, Mark, and Luke all said that Jesus "blessed" instead of "gave thanks" before distributing the food (Mat. 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16). However, we are not to understand that "blessing" the food and "giving thanks" for the food were two different things. John tells us what the Synoptic accounts meant by "blessing" the food: "Jesus therefore took the loaves, and having given thanks, he distributed to them that were set down..." (John 6:11).

These alternate ways of describing Jesus' pre-meal expressions is instructive concerning what He said in instituting His Supper – and in what we are to do in keeping the Supper. Matthew recorded that "...Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it; and he gave to the disciples. and said, Take, eat: this is my body" (Mat. 26:26). Likely from the wording of this statement brethren who lead prayers at the Lord's Table so often say, "Bless this bread..., Bless this cup..." However, this wording demonstrates a misunderstanding of what Jesus did in instituting the Supper. He did not ask His Father to "bless" the bread and the fruit of the vine, as if they did not have the Father's blessing: He **blessed** the bread and the cup! As with the feeding of the 5,000, when He "blessed" He simply "gave thanks." This is amply confirmed by the fact that Matthew immediately said that He "gave thanks" for the cup (v. 27). Moreover, Luke and Paul both confirm this by writing that Jesus "gave thanks" for the bread (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:23–24). We learn, therefore, that we have no precedent for asking God's blessings on the bread and the fruit of the vine; indeed, they have had God's blessings upon them for almost 2,000 years because of what they memorialize. We should simply follow the example of the Savior and **give thanks** at the Lord's Table, which, in my experience of hearing such prayers for several decades, is seldom done.

Observe with me a striking parallel between what Jesus did concerning the physical bread for the 5,000 and what He later did concerning the "bread of life" for all mankind. He

gave the physical bread to the apostles and charged them to give it to the multitude (cf. Mark 6:41), which they did. He later charged the apostles to take the Gospel to the multitudes all over the world so that they might be saved eternally (Mat. 28:18–20; Mark 16: 1–16). They were faithful to the latter task, as they had been with the former. We may also observe that the multitudes had no other source of food than Christ, delivered to them by the apostles. Likewise, Christ is the only source of the spiritual “bread of life” (John 6:33–35), and He delivered it through His apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:19–20), first orally, then by means of the New Testament. There is no other source for the bread of life.

Matthew doesn’t tell us at what point the magnificent multiplication of the food took place, whether when Jesus broke it up for distribution or while the apostles were distributing it. However, the food was multiplied sufficiently for all those assembled to eat – and not just to taste, but till they were filled. It was so abundant that seven baskets of “leftovers” were gathered up, a far larger quantity than was in Jesus’ possession at the beginning.

After telling us that all the multitude was fed, with food left over, Matthew then stated the size of the crowd, perhaps waiting this late in the narrative to give this information for sake of emphasis. The number of men was 4,000, besides women and children (the usual manner of expressing crowd sizes in the New Testament). His description implied that some women and children were present. If we estimate most conservatively that there was only one woman or child on the average for every man present, the number immediately swells to 8,000. It is possible that there were many more than this. This is a miracle of creation – creating something out of nothing – and it is staggering to our imagination even to contemplate it.

Skeptics allege that the feeding of the 5,000 and of the 4,000 are really the same incident (a brother – not a skeptic in the usual sense – once raised this very question in a congregational Bible class I was teaching). They assume that since the miracles are so much alike in their details that Matthew and Mark must have “invented” the feeding of the 4,000. “After all,” they argue, “Luke and John record only the feeding of the 5,000.” However, several details (besides the sizes of the respective crowds and the locations) are **not** alike between the two occasions. The amount of food with which Jesus started was greater, and the number of baskets of leftovers was fewer when the 4,000 were fed. If one were to “make up” a miracle similar to another, surely the crowd would be larger in the second than in the first, the amount of food with which Jesus began would have been less, and the quantity of leftovers would have been greater.

However, the opposite of these is true. Jesus settled the matter completely when He later reminded the apostles of the feeding of the 5,000 **and** of the 4,000 as separate incidents (Mat. 16:9-10). Thus, Matthew and Mark are fully vindicated by Christ, and the prejudice of the skeptics, doubters, and infidels is graphically exposed.

Having treated the multitude to three days of healing miracles, climaxed by a grand miraculous banquet, Jesus dismissed the people and sailed to the western side of the Sea of Galilee. His destination was Magadan. Mark gives the name of the place as Dalmanutha (Mark 8:10). The site of neither place is definitely known. It is quite possible that the two places were near each other, and that Jesus went to both, or it may be that the same town was known by both names. In either case, the two accounts are merely complementary rather than contradictory.

### Conclusion

This chapter records some extremely thrilling episodes in the daily life and work of the Lord. It reveals a startling contrast between bold, unapologetic refutation and exposure of evil and hypocritical men set against Jesus' performing compassionate miraculous acts of healing and feeding of thousands. The miraculous acts of Jesus in this chapter are astounding to readers even 2,000 years removed from His time. If we had no additional records of His mighty works, these alone should be sufficient to convince the honest student that Jesus was Who He said He was – the Christ, the only begotten Son of God.

### Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. J.W. McGarvey, *Commentary on Matthew and Mark* (Des Moines, IA: Eugene S. Smith., 1875, reprinted n.d.), p. 136.
3. H. Leo Boles, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1936). p. 335; McGarvey, p. 139; Joseph Addison Alexander, *Thornapple Commentaries – The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1860 reprinted 1980), p. 424.
4. Boles. p. 335.
5. Alexander, p. 423.
6. Our English word, *maimed*, usually refers to one who has been mutilated, disfigured, or through accident, cruel treatment, or birth defect suffered the loss of a bodily member or function. The Greek word for "maimed" (*kullous*) in this text is a more general term, however, referring to "...a limb of the body that is in any way abnormal or incapable of being used; also of persons who have such limbs crippled, deformed" (William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New*



*Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957], p. 458). While the term used by Matthew in this context does not necessarily refer to Jesus' replacing missing bodily parts on this occasion, it is broad enough to include such. He dramatically and unquestionably proved His power to do so when he replaced the ear of Malchus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:50-51; John 19:10).

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the Spiritual Sword Lectures, hosted by the Getwell Church of Christ, Memphis, TN, October 16-20, 1988. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The Book of Matthew*, ed. Garland Elkins and Thomas B. Warren (Memphis, TN: Getwell Church of Christ).]

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