Matthew 15 — Living as subjects of the King

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Introduction: What Does God Really Want?

Matthew 14 concluded with people recognising Yeshua's extraordinary authority. He had fed thousands, walked upon the Sea of Galilee, rescued Peter, and healed the sick. His disciples had worshipped Him, declaring, “You are certainly God's Son.” But recognising the King is only the beginning. What does it mean to live as someone who genuinely belongs to Him?

Matthew 15 explores that question through a series of encounters that initially appear unrelated. Religious leaders arrive from Jerusalem to challenge Yeshua over ceremonial handwashing. He responds by exposing the danger of allowing human tradition to undermine God's commandments. A Canaanite mother then approaches Him in Gentile territory, demonstrating extraordinary faith. Finally, great crowds receive healing and food from the Messiah whose compassion extends beyond the boundaries of Israel.

The chapter challenges our assumptions about religious identity and insider advantage. Those who possess considerable biblical knowledge can misunderstand God's purposes, while someone without their privileges may recognise the Messiah and trust Him wholeheartedly. This is not a rejection of Jewish identity, religious practice, or tradition. Rather, Matthew invites us to examine the relationship between what we do outwardly and what we believe inwardly.

The question running through the chapter is straightforward but searching: does our religious life express a heart genuinely devoted to God?

Tradition and the Word of God (Matthew 15:1–9)

Some Pharisees and scribes arrive from Jerusalem to confront Yeshua. That journey is significant. Jerusalem was the centre of Jewish religious learning and authority, and these men had travelled a considerable distance to investigate a teacher whose influence was growing throughout Galilee. Their opening question makes clear that they are not simply seeking information.

“Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread” (15:2).

Now, we must understand the accusation. They are not complaining that Yeshua's disciples have dirty hands. Nobody is worried about germs or suggesting that the disciples should have used soap before lunch. The question concerns ceremonial washing, a practice associated with the traditions of the elders.

Jewish people today may recognise the expression netilat yadayim, the ritual washing of hands before eating bread. A blessing is recited, and the washing becomes part of the preparation for a meal. The precise forms of this practice developed over time, but ceremonial washing was already important to certain Jewish groups during Yeshua's ministry.

Where did the command originate? The Torah instructed priests to wash their hands and feet when approaching the Tabernacle or ministering at the altar (Exodus 30:17–21). Yet the Torah does not command every Israelite to perform this particular ritual before eating an ordinary meal. The practice belonged to the developing body of interpretations and customs associated with the Oral Law.

The Pharisees regarded these traditions as important safeguards around the written Torah. Their intention was to preserve holiness in daily life by extending principles of purity into ordinary activities. Later rabbinic Judaism would preserve and develop extensive discussions of these matters in the Mishnah and Gemara, together forming the Talmud. Those compilations came centuries after Yeshua, but the traditions they discuss have earlier roots.

The distinction between written Scripture and oral interpretation is essential here. The Pharisees are accusing the disciples of violating the tradition of the elders, not a commandment explicitly given at Sinai. Yeshua does not begin by defending His disciples. Instead, He challenges His accusers: “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” (15:3).

He then introduces a much more serious example. God commanded Israel to honour father and mother. The commandment appears in Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16. Honouring parents includes respect, gratitude, and appropriate conduct, but it also has practical financial implications. When parents become elderly or unable to support themselves, their children bear responsibility for their care.

In our culture, we sometimes reduce honour to politeness. We stand when an elderly person enters, speak respectfully, or remember Mother's Day. Those are good things, but biblical honour goes further. Parents who have spent years caring for their children should not be abandoned when they themselves need assistance.

Yeshua describes a religious arrangement by which someone could declare resources korban, meaning an offering dedicated to God. The word is related to the Hebrew root karav, to draw near. An offering was something brought near to God in worship. The problem arose when such a declaration became a means of avoiding responsibility. A son could effectively tell his parents, “I would have helped you, but what I might have given you has already been dedicated to God.”

It sounds religious, doesn't it? The money is supposedly committed to a holy purpose. Yet the result is that needy parents receive nothing. Yeshua exposes the contradiction. A tradition intended to honour God has become an excuse for disobeying Him. The religious appearance of the action cannot disguise its moral failure.

This raises an important question about tradition itself. Are traditions inherently wrong?

I remember reading Warren Wiersbe's commentary on this passage. I have appreciated his teaching over many years, but I disagreed with the broad contrast he drew between tradition and God's truth. He presented tradition as something external, associated with pleasing people, while God's Word was internal and concerned with pleasing God. There is an important truth in his concern about empty religious practice. But I believe the contrast is too sweeping. It risks suggesting that tradition itself is the problem.

I don't agree. Traditions can be wonderful. They can teach us, remind us, and help us develop habits that sustain a life of faith. Every family has traditions, and every religious community does too.

For instance, consider the mezuzah on the doorpost of a Jewish home. Deuteronomy 6:9 instructs Israel to write God's words upon the doorposts of the house and upon the gates. Jewish tradition developed the familiar practice of placing biblical passages inside a small case attached to the doorway. Some people touch or kiss the mezuzah as they enter or leave.

Is that commanded in precisely that form? No. But does the practice remind us of God's Word and the identity of a household devoted to Him? Certainly it can.

Or think about the siddur, the Jewish prayer book. Its prayers have given generations of Jewish people a common language of worship. The Shema has been recited in homes, synagogues, and moments of extraordinary suffering. Its familiar words unite personal devotion with the confession of Israel's faith: “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Christians have traditions too. Some kneel to pray, others fold their hands or lift them toward heaven. Some use written liturgies, while others prefer spontaneous prayer. None

of these forms guarantees that someone is speaking sincerely to God. But neither does the use of a familiar form make the prayer insincere.

I learned this personally in New York City in 1982. At the time, I was attending a lively congregation and had little interest in moving to another church, certainly not an Anglican church. The robes, the liturgy, and some aspects of its leadership were outside my religious comfort zone. Yet through a remarkable series of circumstances, I became convinced that I should visit.

What I discovered surprised me. The preaching was biblical and substantial. The prayers were rich in scriptural language. The congregation operated ministries serving homeless and vulnerable people, putting its professed faith into practical action. I had expected tradition to obstruct spiritual vitality. Instead, I discovered that it could support and nourish it.

That experience changed my perspective. The Book of Common Prayer could help people pray thoughtfully, just as the siddur had helped Jewish people for generations. The question was not whether the words had been said before. It was whether those words expressed genuine devotion.

Tradition becomes dangerous when it is elevated to the authority of Scripture or used to excuse disobedience. The mezuzah may remind me to honour God, but I must not condemn another believer for failing to touch it. A prayer book may help me worship, but I must not imagine that repeating its words automatically makes my heart right with God.

Yeshua's criticism concerns precisely this confusion. The leaders have allowed a human arrangement to nullify an unmistakable divine commandment.

He quotes Isaiah 29:13: “This people honours Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.” Isaiah had addressed the religious condition of Judah centuries earlier, yet Yeshua recognised the same problem in His own generation.

The tragedy is not that people have developed customs. It is that they have confused religious performance with obedience. A good tradition serves God's Word. It must never become its master. In fact, I’ve often said that we don’t keep traditions; traditions keep us.

What Really Defiles a Person? (Matthew 15:10–20)

Having confronted the delegation from Jerusalem, Yeshua calls the crowd to listen. He wants everyone to understand the principle beneath the dispute. “It is not what enters the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth” (15:11).

This statement has often been treated as though Yeshua were principally discussing the kosher laws. Some readers conclude that He was announcing that the dietary distinctions of Leviticus 11 no longer mattered. But that interpretation moves too quickly away from Matthew's immediate context.

The original complaint concerned eating bread with ceremonially unwashed hands. The Pharisees believed that neglecting the prescribed washing could result in ritual defilement. Yeshua challenges the assumption that this particular practice determines a person's spiritual condition.

That does not settle every later Christian discussion about food and the Torah. Mark's parallel account includes an explanatory statement about foods (Mark 7:19), and the wider New Testament addresses dietary questions in several settings including meat sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8-10). But Matthew's argument must first be understood on its own terms.

The disciples recognise that the Pharisees have taken offence. Their concern is understandable. These are influential religious teachers from Jerusalem, and offending them could have consequences for Yeshua's ministry.

But Yeshua refuses to measure truth by the approval of anyone else, in this case, respected authorities. He warns that every plant His heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted, and He describes the leaders as blind guides leading the blind.

The image is severe. A guide is supposed to know the way. People trust guides because they believe those guides can lead them safely through unfamiliar territory. A blind guide cannot fulfil that responsibility, regardless of how confidently he speaks or walks.

Yeshua is not declaring that every Pharisee is beyond redemption. Elsewhere in the Gospels, individual Pharisees engage with Him in different ways, and many eventually become His followers. His warning here concerns religious leadership that has lost its ability to recognise the purposes of God.

Peter asks for an explanation, and Yeshua responds with surprise that the disciples still lack understanding.

I appreciate that Matthew includes these moments. The Gospel writers do not present the disciples as spiritual geniuses who grasp everything immediately. They misunderstand, hesitate, become frightened, and ask questions that sometimes seem obvious to the reader.

That is encouraging. I recognise myself in those disciples. There are truths I have heard repeatedly and still need to learn again.

Yeshua explains that food enters the digestive system and passes through the body. Moral defilement, however, comes from within. What proceeds from the mouth reveals the condition of the heart. In biblical language, the heart is more than the centre of emotion. It includes our thoughts, desires, intentions, loyalties, and decisions. Proverbs 4:23 instructs us to guard the heart because the issues of life flow from it.

Yeshua then provides a disturbing list: evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immorality, thefts, false testimony, and slanders. These actions recall the moral commandments given at Sinai. The Torah had prohibited murder, adultery, stealing, and false witness. Yeshua now identifies the inward attitudes from which such violations emerge.

Consider the difference between an unwanted thought and a thought deliberately cultivated. We may experience a moment of resentment toward someone who has offended us. But when we repeatedly revisit the grievance, nourish our anger, and imagine how satisfying revenge would be, something has changed. We are no longer simply experiencing an unwelcome thought. We are giving it a home.

That is why Yeshua's earlier teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is so important. He connected murderous anger with the commandment against killing and lustful intention with the commandment against adultery (Matthew 5:21–30). He was not lowering the moral requirements of the Torah. He was exposing their depth.

The Jewish concern about lashon hara, harmful speech (Literally ‘evil tongue’), provides a particularly useful example. Words can damage another person's reputation even when the speaker never raises a hand against them. Gossip may begin with jealousy, disappointment, or resentment, but once expressed, it can destroy trust and fracture a community.

This concern is derived from Leviticus 19:16. There Moses warns against going about as a slanderer among one's people and against standing idly by the blood of one's neighbour. This ‘standing on’ the blood of your neighbour includes listening to gossip as another is being ‘killed’ by someone else. The commands appear together because our responsibility toward others includes both what we say and what we permit to be said about, or happen to them.

Sometimes the harm is done not by inventing a lie but by passing along something we had no good reason to repeat. We may excuse ourselves by saying that the information was true. Yet truthfulness alone does not establish that the conversation was loving, necessary, or just.

The heart determines whether we use our words to protect our neighbour or to diminish him.

The same principle applies to sexual conduct. Yeshua does not confine adultery to an outward act. He addresses the desires we choose to entertain. A passing awareness of someone's attractiveness is not identical to deliberately cultivating fantasies that betray a covenant relationship. The moral issue includes what we willingly nurture.

This is why religious observance, however valuable, cannot by itself produce a clean heart.

I remember the testimony of Sam Rotman, a concert pianist raised in an Orthodox Jewish environment in the US. He understood the disciplines of Jewish religious life, including prayer and the wearing of tefillin. Yet he recognised within himself attitudes and patterns of speech that needed more than outward regulation. His longing was for inward cleansing.

That longing is hardly new. David prayed after his grievous sin, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). The verb “create” is significant. David was not asking merely for a few adjustments to his behaviour. He recognised his need for God's transforming work.

Yeshua concludes by returning to the issue that began the dispute. Eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person. The religious leaders had been concerned about contamination from outside, while the Messiah was exposing corruption within.

The answer is not to abandon traditions but to recognise where genuine obedience must begin.

Faith Beyond the Borders of Israel (Matthew 15:21–28)

Yeshua now withdraws into the region of Tyre and Sidon, along the Mediterranean coast in what is today Lebanon. This is predominantly Gentile territory, and Matthew introduces a woman whose identity makes the encounter especially striking.

He calls her a Canaanite. Mark identifies her as Syrophoenician by birth (Mark 7:26), but Matthew uses the ancient designation associated with the peoples Israel encountered when entering the Promised Land. To Jewish readers, the word would carry considerable historical weight.

Now a woman identified with those ancient peoples approaches Israel's Messiah seeking mercy. Her daughter is suffering terribly from demonic oppression, and the mother's anguish is unmistakable. She cries out, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!” (15:22).

That title deserves attention. “Son of David” is not a generic expression for a religious teacher. It identifies Yeshua with the royal promises made to David and the expectation of Israel's Messiah.

How did this Gentile woman come to use such language? Matthew does not tell us. Perhaps she had heard reports from travellers or people who had witnessed Yeshua's works. What matters is that she approaches Him with a remarkable recognition of His identity.

Yet Yeshua does not answer her. I have always found this silence uncomfortable. Here is a desperate mother pleading for her daughter, and the Messiah says nothing. We have seen Him respond compassionately to the sick, the hungry, and the grieving. Why is this encounter different?

The disciples become irritated by her persistent cries and urge Him to send her away. The Greek wording permits discussion about whether they want Him simply to dismiss her or to grant her request so that she will leave. Either way, they want the interruption resolved.

Yeshua answers, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). We should not rush past that statement. Yeshua's mission had a definite historical and covenantal priority. He was born into the land of Israel, lived under the Torah, and came in fulfilment of promises made to the patriarchs and prophets. Earlier He had instructed the Twelve to go to the lost sheep of Israel rather than begin their mission among the Gentiles (10:5–6).

The distinction is not between a God who loves Jewish people and a God who dislikes Gentiles. It concerns the order in which God's promises are being fulfilled.

God called Abraham and promised that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Israel was chosen for a purpose that ultimately extended beyond Israel. Paul would later explain that Messiah became a servant to the circumcision to confirm God's promises to the patriarchs, so that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy (Romans 15:8–9).

The woman now kneels before Yeshua and pleads, “Lord, help me!” There is something moving about the simplicity of that prayer. She offers no argument about her worthiness, no account of her religious achievements, and no attempt to persuade Yeshua that she deserves special treatment.

She simply asks for help from the Messiah.

Yeshua replies, “It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs” (15:26).

This is difficult language for modern readers, and we should acknowledge that difficulty rather than explain it away. The image places the children first and the dogs in a secondary position. The Greek word refers particularly to small household dogs, not the wild scavengers commonly found in ancient streets. That gives the illustration a domestic setting, but the distinction remains unmistakable.

The children's bread represents provision belonging first to Israel within the historical mission of the Messiah. In this particular encounter, the woman is seeking deliverance for her daughter.

What happens next is extraordinary. “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table” (15:27).

She accepts the priority of the children, but she sees something else within Yeshua's illustration. The master's provision is abundant enough that even the crumbs can satisfy those beneath the table.

She does not ask Yeshua to abandon Israel's calling. She asks Him to extend His mercy. I have sometimes described this conversation as Yeshua drawing out her faith. Her initial appeal becomes a more persistent plea, and finally she expresses remarkable confidence in the abundance of His provision. Matthew does not explicitly state that Yeshua intended to test or strengthen her, so that remains my interpretation. But the narrative certainly allows us to witness the depth of her trust as the conversation unfolds.

Yeshua responds, “O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish” (15:28). Her daughter is healed immediately. Only twice in Matthew's Gospel does Yeshua explicitly commend someone for great faith. The other occasion concerns a Roman centurion in Matthew 8. Both are Gentiles.

That is a remarkable observation in a Gospel deeply concerned with Israel's Messiah and the fulfilment of Jewish Scripture.

The woman has not displaced Israel. She has recognised Israel's King and trusted the mercy of Israel's God. Her faith becomes a living demonstration that the blessing promised to Abraham is reaching the nations.

The Compassion of the King for the Nations (Matthew 15:29–39)

Yeshua returns to the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee and goes up onto a mountain. Great crowds gather, bringing people who are lame, blind, crippled, mute, and suffering from other conditions. They place these people at His feet, and He heals them.

Matthew's description recalls Isaiah 35:5–6, where the prophet announces that the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.

These are signs of the promised restoration associated with God's saving intervention. When John the Baptiser earlier questioned whether Yeshua was the Coming One, Yeshua pointed to precisely such works as evidence (Matthew 11:4–5).

One detail in Matthew's account is especially interesting. The crowds glorify “the God of Israel” (15:31). Why that expression? Jewish people ordinarily spoke of praising God without needing to identify Him in this way. The phrase may suggest that many among the crowds were Gentiles who recognised the power of Israel's God through the ministry of Israel's Messiah.

The precise location and ethnic composition of the gathering are not explicitly established by Matthew. Mark's parallel account places the surrounding ministry in the Decapolis region (Mark 7:31), making a substantial Gentile presence plausible. That setting matters when we reach the next miracle.

Yeshua tells His disciples that He has compassion for the people because they have remained with Him for three days and have nothing to eat. He does not want to send them away hungry, lest they collapse on the journey home.

Notice that He raises the concern Himself. The crowd does not organise a protest or demand refreshments. Yeshua recognises their need before they ask.

This is compassion expressed in practical attention. He knows they have listened and watched for days, and He also knows they must walk home. Their physical condition matters to Him.

The disciples ask where enough bread could be found in such a remote place. We might wonder how they could ask that question after witnessing the feeding of the five thousand. Yet I find their hesitation remarkably familiar. We may have experienced God's provision in one difficult situation and still become anxious when the next challenge arrives.

Experience alone does not guarantee mature faith. Sometimes the lesson must be learned again under different circumstances.

This time the disciples have seven loaves and a few small fish. Yeshua directs the crowd to sit, gives thanks, breaks the bread, and distributes it through His disciples. Everyone who is seated eats until satisfied, and seven baskets of leftovers remain.

Matthew is careful to distinguish this event from the feeding in chapter 14. There were five thousand men in the earlier gathering and four thousand here, besides women and children. The earlier miracle began with five loaves and two fish; this one with seven loaves and a few fish. Twelve baskets remained after the first feeding, while seven remain after the second.

The Greek terms used for the baskets also differ between the two accounts. The earlier feeding uses kophinoi, commonly associated with smaller baskets, while this account uses

spyrides, a term that can refer to larger baskets. Matthew is not merely repeating an earlier story with different numbers.

Yeshua Himself will refer separately to both feedings in Matthew 16:9–10, confirming that the Gospel intends us to understand two distinct events.

But why record two such similar miracles? The possible Gentile setting offers a meaningful explanation. The first feeding occurred among predominantly Jewish crowds. The second appears to take place in a region where Gentiles were numerous. If so, Matthew is showing that the same Messiah who provides bread for Israel also provides for the nations.

We should be cautious about assigning a precise symbolic meaning to the seven baskets. Some interpreters associate the number with fullness or with the nations, but Matthew does not explain it. We need not insist upon a symbolism that the text leaves unstated. The more important observation is that nobody goes away hungry.

Yeshua's provision is sufficient, and His disciples once again become the means by which that provision reaches the people. They do not create the miracle. They distribute what He supplies.

This offers a helpful picture of ministry. God does not ask us to manufacture grace, invent truth, or produce spiritual life through our own ingenuity. He calls us to be faithful with what He places in our hands.

There is also a challenge here for congregations and ministries. We can become so occupied with teaching, organisation, and religious programmes that we fail to notice the immediate needs of those around us. The Messiah who proclaims the Kingdom also cares whether people have enough food to complete their journey.

Compassion is not an optional decoration added to sound theology. It is part of the character of the King we proclaim.

Conclusion: The Heart God Seeks

Matthew 15 begins with an accusation about unwashed hands before people eat and ends with thousands of people eating, receiving the generous provision of Israel's Messiah. Along the way, Yeshua exposes the danger of religious customs that contradict God's commandments, identifies the heart as the source of moral corruption, and commends the remarkable faith of a single Gentile mother.

The chapter invites us to consider what our religious life is actually producing. Are our practices helping us love God and neighbour, or have they become substitutes for obedience? Are we guarding the inner life from which our words and actions emerge? Are

we willing to approach Yeshua with the humility of someone who knows that mercy is a gift rather than an entitlement?

These are not questions reserved for Pharisees, disciples, or people living in the first century. They belong to every generation of believers.

The next chapter will bring Yeshua's disciples to a decisive question about His identity: “Who do you say that I am?” Matthew 15 has prepared us to understand why the answer must involve more than correct words. Genuine faith recognises the King, trusts His mercy, and allows His Word to govern the heart.

Takeaways

- Tradition serves us best when it strengthens our relationship with God.
- A clean heart matters long before clean hands.
- Faith asks for mercy without claiming entitlement.
- The King of Israel brings blessing to the nations.

Memory Verse

Matthew 15:8 — “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.”

Bibliography

- Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Loyal: Following the King of Kings,
- Mishnah, tractate Yadayim, for later rabbinic discussions of handwashing and ritual purity.