

# Lesson 1

## Proper 15

### **The Holy Gospel: Matthew 15:21–28**

Jesus had been ministering in and around Capernaum and had conflicted openly with the Pharisees over “the tradition of the elders” (v. 1). He had indicted them for using such traditions to excuse failure to obey God’s command to honor their elderly parents by saying the money for their care had been given as an offering to God instead. He judged them guilty of honoring God with their lips while their hearts were far from Him. He said their teachings were but rules taught by men.

The Pharisees had criticized Jesus’ disciples for eating without ceremonially washing their hands first. Jesus explained to the crowd that it is not what goes into a person’s mouth but what comes out of it that “defiles” a person. He told them to leave the Pharisees and their legalisms alone, calling the Pharisees “blind guides” (v. 14). Jesus then connected the mouth with the heart, and the heart with the evil that is part of human life.

Jesus’ ministry was undergoing a change in direction, precipitated by the death of John the Baptist and the growing animosity of the Jews’ religious leaders. He no longer sought out the people by traveling from village to village in Galilee to teach in the synagogues and in the open countryside. Instead, He began to withdraw with His disciples to focus on their training as His apostles. He was looking toward the fulfillment of His mission in His suffering and death. That was the reason for this withdrawal to the region of Tyre and Sidon. These Syrophenician cities were to the north and west of Galilee on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. They were the seaport terminals of the Way of the Sea, the trade route that connected Damascus and regions beyond with the Greek world—a route that swung down to pass the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum. This was an easy, natural road for Jesus to take in His desire to get away from the crowds for a time of interaction with His disciples.

Jesus’ reputation as a healer had preceded Him. No large-scale interaction with the Canaanites of the region is indicated, but Jesus was always ready to minister in mercy to those who came to Him in faith. Matthew included this incident as a forecast of active outreach to “the nations,” the mission of the Church for whom he wrote his Gospel.

1. What does it say about this Gentile woman that she called Jesus “Son of David”? Why did Jesus not respond immediately to her call? Why were the disciples eager to have Jesus send her away?

2. Why did Jesus, who came to be the Savior of all, say to His disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”? (Compare Matthew 10:5–6.)

The woman persisted, only to face another test. The Greek language, which was probably spoken in this exchange, softens Jesus' words to her a little. The word used here for "dogs" does not speak of the stray, scavenging dogs so common in the marketplaces, but of family pets, kept in the house and allowed even in the dining area.

3. In what sense, however, did this choice of metaphor hit this Gentile woman hard as a test of her faith? What is so striking about the woman's response to Jesus?

We're not told how her daughter's affliction had manifested itself, only that she was "severely oppressed by a demon."

4. Why did Jesus help this woman and heal her daughter even though she was not one of the "lost sheep of the house of Israel"? (Compare Matthew 13:53–58.)

5. What does this incident encourage in us in our own life in the Kingdom?

## **The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 56:1, 6–8**

Following the chapter that pictured the Kingdom as a messianic banquet, offered free of cost to the faithful, comes this chapter that extended the covenant to foreigners.

From the beginning, Israel included foreigners, many of them women. Joseph married an Egyptian, so his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh, who became the patriarchs of two of Israel's tribes, brought that bloodline into Israel. Moses married a Midianite woman. Rahab of Jericho and Ruth the Moabitess became part of Israel and are listed in the genealogical ancestry of Jesus. Sometimes whole families and tribes became *gerim*, or "strangers," in Israel, placing themselves under Israel's protection. Such newcomers were required to share in all the religious obligations and prerogatives, including becoming fully Judaized through circumcision.

Later, the rabbinical schools practiced active proselytizing. Gentiles who entered Judaism fully by accepting circumcision were called "proselytes of righteousness" or "proselytes of the altar." Those who were attracted to Judaism, attended the synagogue services, assumed the moral and some of the legal obligations, but declined to be circumcised, were known as "proselytes of the gate" or "God-fearers."

In this pericope, Isaiah did not proclaim an indiscriminate acceptance of foreigners by the Lord, but specified foreigners who would \_\_\_\_.

6. What assurance was given to each foreigner who "holds fast [to] My covenant"? How would the temple itself reflect this international thrust of God's grace?

7. When would this prophecy find its fulfillment? (See 1 Peter 2:4–10.)
  
8. What does the sovereign Lord’s declaration that closes this lesson say to you?
  
9. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

### **The Epistle for the Day: Romans 11:1–2a, 13–15, 28–32**

Paul was writing to a congregation that was strongly Jewish in character and background. They may have questioned his free approach to including Gentiles in the Church. He had not been to Rome in person, so he stated his case by including in his letter a middle section devoted to the subject of Jew and Gentile in God’s saving purpose. In the first part of chapter 11, he called Jews who believe in Jesus “a remnant, chosen by grace” (v. 5). In this pericope, he then spoke to Gentile Christians about their attitude toward their Jewish brothers and sisters. He brought assurance that “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26)—comprising the spiritual Israel of believing Gentiles and the believing Jewish remnant.

Paul’s outreach to Gentiles with the Gospel was wholeheartedly for their sake. He wanted by all possible means to save some. (See 1 Corinthians 9:19–23.)

10. What added motive did Paul reveal as to why he made so much of his ministry as apostle to the Gentiles?

11. How did the rejection of Christ by the Jews become “the reconciliation of the world”? (See Acts 13:42–52.) In what sense is acceptance of Christ by Jews “life from the dead”?

Paul was concerned about the attitude of Jewish Christians toward Gentile Christians—but he was equally concerned about the attitude of Gentile Christians toward Jews. He did not want them foolishly to boast or be conceited and arrogant about their now having by faith what God’s original chosen people had lost through unbelief. Verses 17–27 deal with this under a metaphor of Gentile Christians being wild olive branches that have been grafted into the original Jewish cultivated olive tree’s rootstock.

Paul called God’s gifts and call “irrevocable.” The *Concordia Self-Study Bible* explains: “God does not change his mind with reference to his call. Even though Israel is presently in a state of unbelief, God’s purpose will be fulfilled in all who believe” (p. 1735). The closing words of this

pericope set forth two cause-and-effect equations that summarize Paul's analysis of God's desire and purpose:

\_\_\_ disobedience (rejection of Christ) = God's merciful outreach to \_\_\_. God's mercy to \_\_\_ = disobedient \_\_\_ turning again to God for mercy.

12. What is meant by "God has consigned all to disobedience, that He may have mercy on all"?

13. How has God consigned you to disobedience so you appreciate His mercy more?

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*Almighty and everlasting Father, You give Your children many blessings even though we are undeserving. In every trial and temptation grant us steadfast confidence in Your loving-kindness and mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

### **The Holy Gospel: Matthew 15:21–28**

1. The woman's approach to Jesus at least says that she was religiously aware of Jewish faith and hopes. It does not necessarily imply that she was a "God-fearer" or a proselyte. Jesus did not respond immediately simply because He was in the territory of Gentiles and did not want to give a wrong impression. He had not turned away from His people, nor from the position that God's promised salvation was to be through Israel. The disciples may have been showing some Jewish prejudice against a Gentile and a woman, but probably they were just getting uneasy and self-conscious about the situation in which she was putting them. Picture it: thirteen Jewish men walking as a group through Gentile territory, being followed by a local woman who called loudly to them for help and even used Jewish religious terminology. That surely made them the focus of everyone's attention.

2. Jesus came to be the fulfillment of the messianic covenant, so He directed His own ministry and that of His disciples to His own people, the Jews. His destiny in God's plan of salvation was for Him to complete the meaning of the entire sacrificial system of the old covenant, becoming the Lamb of God in His suffering and death in Jerusalem. Through fulfilling the covenant promise to Israel, He would become the Redeemer of the world—and call people from all nations to be His chosen people, His spiritual Israel.

3. Gentiles were well aware of the Jews' attitude toward them. They knew that Jews often referred to them as "Gentile dogs"—unknown strays as compared to the Jews, who were God's chosen people. Jesus' use of this metaphor, even with softened wording, might have stirred up resentment in the woman, but it didn't. She was even ready to repeat the metaphor, asking only, like a dog, to eat some "crumbs" of the love God had for His Jewish people.

4. Jesus helped the woman because of her persistent faith. She looked expectantly to Him and was not discouraged when He seemed to put her off.

Martin Franzmann says in *Follow Me*:

Jesus' words on "great" and "little" faith are also a delineation of faith as relatedness to its object. He called the faith of the Canaanite woman a great faith . . . because it saw a greatness and a fullness in God's grace which made that grace sufficient for Jew and Gentile both. . . . When He rebukes His disciples for their littleness of faith He removes their thoughts entirely from any consideration of the

bigness of their *believing*. Not the subjective act of believing, but the relatedness of faith (any faith, so it be faith) to that which is faith's object, to the omnipotent and gracious God, is the basis of the unrestricted promise. There is no human cause commensurate with the effect at all. The mustard seed moves mountains because the mustard seed encloses God. The cure for little faith lies, therefore, not in whipping up within oneself a higher energy of believing but in a desperate turning toward the Person who is faith's object: "Lord, save me." (p. 142)

5. This incident says to us that no one is excluded from God's grace by merely outward circumstances—and that we have a great and loving Savior who will respond to our trusting cries for help.

## The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 56:1, 6–8

**Fill-in Answers:** In speaking of the Lord's acceptance of foreigners, Isaiah specified acceptance of foreigners who would "join themselves to the LORD, to minister to Him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be His servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast My covenant."

6. These who would hold fast to the covenant, the Lord said He would "bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar." The temple would reflect this international thrust by being called "a house of prayer for all peoples."

7. This prophecy never really found its fulfillment in the temple in Jerusalem. Proselytes of righteousness were indeed allowed to worship and offer sacrifices in the temple, but they were a minuscule exception among the nations. The prophecy finds its real fulfillment in the "temple of the Lord" that is built of living stones out of every tribe and nation on earth—those who by faith come into true alignment with Christ, the Cornerstone.

8. The sovereign Lord's declaration that He will "gather yet others to Him besides those already gathered" speaks with assurance to us who are far removed in time and space and ethnicity from those who originally heard these words about being gathered by the Lord. It also encourages us to take part in the gathering process as we give our personal witness about Jesus to those around us and as we generously support the international mission of the Church with the Gospel. (See Ephesians 2:11–22.)

9. This Old Testament Lesson talks about foreigners being accepted and blessed in their relationship with the Lord; the Holy Gospel tells of one who was a harbinger of the movement of the Lord's kingdom into the Gentile world.

## The Epistle for the Day: Romans 11:1–2a, 13–15, 28–32

Paul had said that he was ready to be "all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22). This does not suggest duplicity on his part or unwillingness to take a stand for the truth. It showed Paul's readiness to meet people where they were with his message of full and free acceptance by God through Jesus Christ. He worked at not allowing inconsequential matters to become barriers to his ministry or message.

10. Paul's making much of his ministry to the Gentiles and its successes carried his hope that Jews would become envious of what was happening in the lives of these newly chosen people and that would make them want the blessings that Christ gives for themselves.

11. General acceptance of Jesus as Messiah by the Jews might have led to containment of the Gospel of the Kingdom as “a Jewish thing.” If the Church had been just a “messianic sect within Judaism,” as Judaizers wanted, the Church would have required Gentiles to become “Jewish Christians” by being circumcised and obeying the dietary restrictions. The Gospel of Jesus would have been as restrictive as Judaism had been, and Gentiles would not have been attracted. Few Gentile “God-fearers” went all the way to become “proselytes of the altar.” Jews’ rejection of Christ encouraged its proclamation to non-Jews and led to their reconciliation to God through faith in Christ. Paul had spoken of faithless Israel as being “hardened” by God (11:7–10). Those Jews who are led out of that spiritual rigor mortis to know and believe God’s grace in Christ truly are brought to life from the dead.

God’s gift and call are irrevocable, but God’s call was always a call to life in Him through the gift of faith. Paul had pointed to father Abraham as a prime example of justification by faith (Romans 4). The covenant blessing was not for those who were just physically descended from Abraham, but for those who shared his faith. (See Luke 3:7–8; Galatians 3:26–29)

**Fill-in Answers:** Help your group understand the equations: Israel’s disobedience (rejection of Christ) = God’s merciful outreach to Gentiles. God’s mercy to Gentiles = disobedient Israel’s turning again to God for mercy. (Saying “leads to” instead of “equals” may help in this understanding.)

These equations describe the dynamic that God, in His desire for all, was using.

12. God has let all people follow their sinful nature and be disobedient—the Gentiles in their time and ways, the Jews in their time and ways—so that all may see themselves needing, and eligible for rescue and restoration through His mercy in Christ. He does not deal with some one way and with others another way. Whether Jew or Gentile, salvation is to be found only in God’s mercy in Christ.

13. Invite your group to share how God has used His Word to make them more aware of their sin and unworthiness so that they have become all the more appreciative of His mercy in Jesus Christ. Focusing on sins of omission in this analysis helps. Giving your own testimony will encourage them.