

# WHEN FAITH WON'T LET GO

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***By the Book™*** A Chapter by  
Chapter Bible Study Series  
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## Let's Begin

*According to scientists, the world's strongest glue is not made by Elmer's or even Gorilla Glue. Instead, the strongest glue is only available in nature on river rocks. A single-cell bacterium uses a sugar-based adhesive to stay put on rocks. Scientists tell us it's the equivalent of a Mack truck sitting on top of the rock; it's not going anywhere. It simply won't let go.*

*Today's lesson in Matthew 15 moves us toward embracing a faith similar to the river-rock glue—it won't let go either. As we move through the chapter, we will follow this outline:*

- I. A New Look at Sin (vv. 1-15)**
- II. A New Life of Faith (vv. 21-39)**

### Reflection Connection

*Do you think there is a lack of focus on sin in our culture? How about in the pulpit? How can sin be emphasized without being negative or judgmental? Explain.*

## I. A New Look at Sin (vv. 1-15)

An official delegation had been sent by the religious authorities to Jesus (v. 1). Headquarters had instructed them to press the Nazarene on some particular issues, one of which happened to be pertaining to His disciples: "Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they wash not their hands when they eat bread" (v. 2). Who was it that always gave Jesus the most trouble? Unfortunately, it was the religious crowd. In fact, they have not stopped since the first century.

The exchange Jesus and the Pharisees had reveals a new look at an old problem—sin. Sin is almost a forgotten word in our society. Renowned psychiatrist, Dr. Karl Menninger, wrote a book in 1973 entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* The doctor lamented that the traditional concept of sin was increasingly disappearing in our society. We must remember that we'll never know we need a Savior until we know that we need to be saved.

As we examine these verses, let's keep in mind, first of all, *how sin operates* (vv. 1-6). Notice the accusation in verses 1-2. The disciples had broken one of the laws the Rabbis were notorious for keeping—*ritual cleansing*. Jesus' disciples ignored it and the leaders were furious. The key phrase here is "the tradition of the elders." At the outset, the problem, as stated, has nothing to do with Old Testament law *per se*. Rather it concerns a man-made injunction—the tradition of the elders. Beginning with the days of Ezra, the Jewish authorities had amassed a monumental library of writings on the Law. They called it the Talmud.

In this particular law, the injunction pertained to "washing hands" (v. 2). However, the washing about which Jesus spoke here has little, if anything, to do with hygiene. Instead, the concern the Pharisees possessed pertained to religious ceremony. They taught that if it wasn't done correctly, a person forfeited a right relationship with God.

Moreover, as we will soon see, the Pharisees made their religious interpretations more important than the Word of God. Many people today attempt to substitute their own views, opinions and beliefs for God's Word. Clearly, Jesus corrects such legalistic behavior. In fact, the constant danger of human teachers is that if they are not careful, they'll place their own instructions ahead of the Word of God. The Bible must ever exist as the test for our faith.

### Reflection Connection

*Give a brief definition of moral legalism. What is the difference between moral legalism and moral absolutes? Allow plenty of time for discussion.*



### Reflection Connection

*Name some ways that we place human tradition over God's Word today. Is there good tradition? If so, how may we discern between good tradition and bad tradition?*

### Reflection Connection

*Do we draw the line with meeting our parents' needs in their old age? If so, where? How do we deal with placing our aged parents in a nursing home facility?*

### Reflection Connection

*Share some possible ways the church worships God "with their lips" while their heart remains untouched. What can your group do to help your Pastor close the gap?*

Carefully consider the answer of Jesus: "Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?... Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition" (vv. 3, 6). First of all, Jesus did not concede that His disciples did anything other than transgress "their tradition." On the other hand, the Pharisees transgressed the "commandment of God" and, in doing so, made the Word of God "of none effect" by their tradition.

The illustration Jesus employs concerns the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment: "Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death" (v. 4; cp. Exodus 20:12). Honoring one's parents included supporting them in their old age. The Pharisees, however, had worked out a clever scheme to dodge the Word of God. All they had to do was to proclaim that their goods and properties were "a gift" to God and the Temple (v. 5; cp. Mark 7:11). Under the "tradition" arrangement, while they could still use their resources for themselves, they were under no obligation to take care of their parents because their resources really were "given" to God. So they could still "look spiritual" and at the same not be burdened with their parents' needs.

This is the bread and butter way sin operates—it figures a way to *dodge God's demands*. Religious people who want easy lifestyles always look for ways to accommodate their desires.

We've noted how sin operates (vv. 1-6). Now let's observe *how sin obliterates* (vv. 7-9). Knowing the Pharisees were "hypocrites" (v. 7), the Lord Jesus quotes from Isaiah's prophecy: "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (cp. Isaiah 29:13).

The most significant activity a person can do is worship God. Jesus indicated the Father searched for a people who worshipped Him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Sin obliterates that wonderful relationship with God. God also said through the prophet Isaiah that, "your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" (59:2).

Sin, therefore, **obliterates spiritual worship** (vv. 7-8). The term "hypocrite" literally means "play actor." During the dramatic performances of Jesus' day, actors would often wear masks as they acted out their parts on a stage. Jesus was implying that the Pharisees were little more than stage performers through their elaborate scheme to "look holy" by dedicating all their belongings to God and the Temple while abandoning their responsibilities to honorably care for their aged parents. It was merely a ploy for worldly attention. Is it possible that we do the same today with our attempts to "look holy" on Sundays? Perhaps this becomes clearer if we ask whether our lifestyle on Monday matches our look on Sunday. Worshipping is neither a game nor a strategy to impress God. It is not about words to flatter; it's about hearts filled with faith.

Sin also **obliterates truthful worship** (v. 9). "In vain" is worship offered, God informs us, when sin is involved. The term means that worship is futile, empty, and fruitless. In short, it accomplishes nothing. When we get away from knowing God according to the truth of the Bible, we rob ourselves of reality.



Finally, let's note precisely *where sin originates* (vv. 10-20). Jesus offers a physical illustration: "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man" (v. 11). Jesus is not speaking here about proper diet. Instead, He means that the food that enters our mouth and into our digestive tract never touches our heart. In other words, what you eat can make you sick but it cannot make you a sinner. It can ruin your health but it cannot ruin your heart. The difference is between being unhealthy and unholy.

This highly offended the Pharisees (v. 12). Jesus, however, wasn't concerned about offending them. He was concerned that they, through their scheme to override God's Word, were highly offending God! They were blind guides and all who followed them would end in the same darkness into which they themselves stumbled.

Following the physical illustration, Jesus gave us a spiritual application (vv. 15-20). Even Peter, who was as close to Jesus as any one individual, did not understand what He meant (vv. 15-16). Jesus accommodated the disciples' ignorance and clearly told them His meaning. He offered two lenses through which we may look at sin.

*Sin comes from the inside, from the heart.*

First, Jesus teaches that *sin is inward before it is outward* (vv. 17-18). Food has a physical effect alone. The dietary laws in the Law were used as a picture book of how sin defiles. Sin comes from the inside, from the heart. Any conceivable evil action had its origin in the heart. A person is a sinner because of something deep inside them.

Consequently, it does no spiritual good whatsoever to clean the hands, the plates, the utensils, or the table in any ritualistic fashion. The inside is still in the same shape—*dirty, unholy, and thoroughly sinful*. So, we must see sin as inward before it is outward.

The second lens through which to see sin is this: *sin is potential before it is actual* (vv. 19-20). Sin is examined in the heart before it is enacted in the body. It is pondered in mind and then performed in life. Here Jesus offers an X-ray of the spiritual anatomy of every human being. All comes from the heart. Jesus says: "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (v. 19). Given enough time, every person could commit every one of these heinous acts.

The point was not lost on the Pharisees. No wonder they hated Jesus and schemed to have Him put to death. He exposed their hypocrisy by pushing them to examine their hearts. He does no less with us. Our tired, dry, and empty attempts to not only be holy but also to look holy impresses only sinners just like us. The bottom line is, our hearts are hopeless as they are.

## II. A New Life of Faith (vv. 21-39)

Jesus leaves the borders of comfort for Jewish citizens and heads to the area Matthew describes as the "region of Tyre and Sidon" (v. 21). We moderns must understand that this was not like passing smoothly through the border of one state into another. Instead, Jesus was leaving the confines of acceptable Jewish nationalism into the hated, godless culture of a people condemned by God

### Reflection Connection

*Jesus makes a hard distinction between being unhealthy and unholy. How are the two related? How are they different? Do you think our culture places an appropriate amount of focus on each? Explain.*

### Reflection Connection

*Why does Jesus focus on the heart when He speaks of sin? Is a sin of the heart just as bad as a sin one commits with the body? Explain.*



**Reflection Connection**

*It's been said that the gospel is a "whosoever" message. What does that mean? If everyone is welcome, why do they not all come? Be specific.*

Himself—or so the average Jewish person in Jesus' day believed. Before Matthew finishes his gospel, he records Jesus giving His disciples clear instructions that the Good News of God's Kingdom was meant to be a message for all nations—a "whosoever will come" message.

Were the ending of the first part of chapter 15 the entire message, how depressing it would be. There we learned that no hope exists for us as we deeply look at the sin problem in our life. Now, however, enters a conversation Jesus had with a Canaanite woman which gives us reason to shout for joy! God has a love for us that simply won't let go, which in turn inspires in us a faith in Him that won't let go either.

*He is the only One Who will ultimately satisfy our deepest needs.*

As we unpack this section of Matthew's narrative, *let's observe, first of all, the agonizing mother who made her way to Jesus* (vv. 21-22). The woman's broken heart over her child is obvious. Though all parents have similar concern for their offspring, her little girl presented a special case—she was vexed with a demon (v. 22). Satan's strategy focused on attacking her daughter. He took opportunity to control a significant portion of her life, and, through the little girl's ruin, ruin her mother's life in the process. The Devil will stop at nothing in wrecking a person's life.

**Reflection Connection**

*The comedian, Flip Wilson, used to often say in one of his comedy routines "The devil made me do it." Do you think the devil is that powerful? How do you explain the people in the Gospel record who were possessed? Were they "made to do anything"? Explain.*

When the woman approached Jesus with her agonizing problem, she selflessly began to plea for her daughter's benefit, "a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil" (v. 22). She "cried unto him," indicating a grievous agony of soul. The "mercy" for which she pled was an indirect request for her daughter, not herself. Observe further that the woman was pleading rather than demanding. Her humility stands as a lesson for us all in our approach to God.

Any time we come to our Lord, it should be requesting, not demanding. Some have the wrong idea that we are in a position to demand from God as if God is obligated to give, ignoring the fact that all we receive from Him is through His gracious mercy. He is delighted to give to us for that is the God we serve! However, the woman shows a fundamental respect which we should all embrace.

**Reflection Connection**

*Is there ever a time when we pray that we are bold, even demanding in our prayers to God? What is the difference between claiming the promises God gives us and demanding He keep His Word to us?*

Even more, the woman shows us that when our life is hopeless and no answers are forthcoming, the place we should have come in the first place was to Jesus. He is the only One Who will ultimately satisfy our deepest needs.

*Second, let's move from the agonizing mother to the response of an amazing Master* (vv. 23-24). The response of Jesus was not what one would expect. Rather than telling the woman, "Sure, I'll assist you," His response was total silence, "But he answered her not a word" (v. 23). The woman had addressed Jesus as, "Lord, son of David" (v. 22). She was a Gentile with no claim to the Jewish Messiah.

As Jesus silently awaited for the woman to ponder in her heart, the disciples insisted He send her away (v. 23). Jesus then spoke: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24). This could have been enough to send



### Reflection Connection

*Jesus implied that the woman was a dog. How is it appropriate to do such? Explain the difference between Jesus' use of "dog" and our inappropriate use of stereotypes.*

### Golden Greek Nugget

On the first reading of Jesus' words to the Gentile woman in verse 26, it seems conclusive Jesus was following standard Jewish custom of referring to the hated Gentiles as "dogs" (compare Philippians 3:1). However, upon a closer reading, we find this is decidedly not the case. The term Jesus employed is not "kyron," translated "dog," certainly used elsewhere as a term of reproach (Rev. 22:15). Instead Jesus used the term that means "little dogs"; that is, the small puppies of domesticated family pets. The woman's response in verse 27 makes this meaning perfectly clear. She says: "yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." This is in precise keeping with the practices of the first century family whose smaller pets would glean from under the table crumbs that fell as the family ate. This, then, is not the harsh response some have assumed it to be.

another person packing, giving up on ever finding assistance for their needs. Not this woman. Instead there is every indication that genuine faith was operating in her life. Even after she fell before Jesus, He seems to test her further by suggesting that the food He offered was for children not "dogs" (v. 26). To our modern ears, this must seem harsh, perhaps even cruel.

Yet, Jesus was not turning her away; nor was He treating her harshly. He was developing her, leading her, and teaching her. Indeed, "dog" was what Jews called Gentiles, not what Jesus called either her or other Gentiles.

The simple point of this section is her willingness to take the help Jesus offered even if it were crumbs. Crumbs from the table of Jesus cannot be compared to the most royal feast from the table of kings.

Finally, we note the appealing miracle that took place (vv. 25-28). Listen to Jesus as He responds to the woman's faith: "O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour" (v. 28). Jesus delights to do what we're willing to let Him do. There's only one other person that Jesus had a similar commendation pertaining to such "great faith"—the centurion (8: 10).

The promise Jesus gives will never fail in its performance (v. 28). Jesus produced the goods: "And her daughter was made whole from that very hour." He needs neither to be there Himself nor send word for the people there to perform a certain requirement. Rather He spoke and the miracle was complete. Jesus responds immediately to our faith and trust in Him.

Predictably, word got around quickly that Jesus had performed another miracle. People from all around came running, bringing their sick with them (vv. 28-31). As He healed them, the crowds "glorified the God of Israel" (v. 31). Afterward, the multitudes grew hungry and Jesus saw another opportunity for the disciples to experience the compassion God had for His people. Miraculously, the four thousand were fed similarly to before (vv. 32-39; cp. 14:13-20).

### Wrap Up

*As chapter 15 begins, we discover a new way to look at sin. The religious leaders had a tendency to view sin as something outward, an act performed. In addition, the act they most frequently associated with sin was some type of ceremonial failure to "wash their hands" before a meal. In other words, they associated holiness with ritual cleanliness. Jesus challenged such a view. In fact, He insisted sin began within a person's heart, making sin a spiritual issue, not a religious one. Consequently, the only way a person receives help from such spiritual ruin is through Jesus Christ Who is Savior of the entire world.*

*To demonstrate this, Jesus responds to the faith of a non-Jewish woman giving her the miracle for which she sought. Jesus Christ is the only remedy for the ruin sin causes and the only way to Jesus is through faith. Won't you place your life in His hands today? Won't your trust Him to rid your heart of sin today?*

