

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?