

Matthew 15

A study in true worship

- What is proper Christian worship? Worship wars (conflicting values in answering this question) are not unique to our culture. There have always been tensions with respect to what constitutes worthy worship.
- Jesus had a lot to say on the subject and this chapter captures a good bit of it.

1. Proper worship requires that we be self-critical. (15:1-9).

¹ Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, ² “Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” ³ And He answered and said to them, “And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For **God said**, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.’ ⁵ But **you say**, ‘Whoever shall say to {his} father or mother, Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given {to God,} ⁶ he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And {thus} you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ⁸ ‘*This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me.*’ ⁹ *But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.*”

- This hand washing tradition in Jesus’ time was largely oral and orally transmitted; but the Pharisees, though not the Sadducees, viewed it as having authority very nearly equal to the canon. It was later codified under Rabbi Judah the Prince (c. A.D. 135-200) to form the Mishnah.
- It is not difficult to understand the rationale for hand washing as a symbol of the inner cleansing of the heart that was needed. In time however, the symbol became the focus and the end in itself.
- The tension here is between “God said” and “you say”.
- Jesus responds, not with a direct answer, but with a counter question. In doing so he suggests that before the Pharisees or anyone has a right to critique others they need to look at their own house.
- Jesus exposes the vanity of worship that is not heart felt and God directed.
- The Pharisees were using a technicality (in their giving) for material gain while appearing to be serving God. A parallel to this situation in our day - Giving, that is only or primarily motivated by its tax advantage to the giver.
- The emotional equivalent (today) to the Pharisees reaction to Jesus might be seen in the modern phrase, “we are acting worldly.”

2. Proper worship requires that we give attention to the heart. (15:10-20)

¹⁰ And after He called the multitude to Him, He said to them, “Hear, and understand. ¹¹ Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds

out of the mouth, this defiles the man.” 12 Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” 13 But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be rooted up. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” 15 And Peter answered and said to Him, “Explain the parable to us.” 16 And He said, “Are you still lacking in understanding also? 17 Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? 18 But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. 20 These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.”

- Defilement is often tied to cultural markers - In our day (alcohol, the theater, long hair on men, slacks on women, informal dress in worship, etc.)
- The most important part of holy worship is the condition of the penitent heart.
- The issue of meat offered to idols in I Cor.8 and 10 makes the same point - the heart not the meat is the issue.
- Jesus also suggests that the way a person talks reveals a lot about their heart. This does not contradict verse 8-9 above which refer more to PR speech not unguarded conversation. We might ask ourselves, what do we reveal in the tone and content of our speech?
- Verse 13 reflects a common theme in John’s gospel - the sovereignty of God behind human response. **Jn.6:37** “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away”

3. Proper worship requires that we be hungry for God. (15:21-28)

21 And Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And behold, a Canaanite woman came out from that region, and {began} to cry out, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.” 23 But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came to {Him} and kept asking Him, saying, “Send her away, for she is shouting out after us.” 24 But He answered and said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25 But she came and {began} to bow down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” 26 And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” 27 But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” 28 Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed at once.

- This story presents Jesus in a way that seems out of character. The best explanation may lie in the realization that Jesus’ harsh words are not directed to the woman so much as reflecting the common Jewish thinking of the day (shared by the disciples). Jesus was taking this opportunity to

again teach the disciples. Jesus wants to show the dramatic difference between the faith of this Gentile woman and the Jewish male leaders.

- The contrast between this story and the one that precedes it are interesting and significant. In both cases Jesus offers a rather harsh commentary with respect to the people involved. But the contrast between the woman and the Pharisees is dramatic. The woman sees herself as needy, the Pharisees do not. The woman is not put off by the critique while the Pharisees are offended. The Canaanite woman expresses a level of humility and selfless faith that is remarkable and dramatic as contrasted with the Pharisees.
- Matthew includes many accounts (like this one) of Jesus' ministry to Gentiles.
- Our hunger for God will condition our worship. Too often we enter worship with a passion for fellowship, entertainment, learning skills for success in this life, etc. but not for God.

4. Proper worship requires that we be **AWARE** of what God has done in Christ. (15:29-31)

29 And departing from there, Jesus went along by the Sea of Galilee, and having gone up to the mountain, He was sitting there. 30 And great multitudes **came to Him**, bringing with them {those who were} lame, crippled, blind, dumb, and many others, and they **laid them down at His feet**; and He healed them, 31 so that the multitude **marveled** as they saw the dumb speaking, the crippled restored, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they **glorified** the God of Israel.

- It is in our recognition of what God is doing that we are postured to properly worship.
- The challenge for many of us is to recognize the hand of God in life and glorify Him.

5. Proper worship requires that we **SERVE** with Christ. (15:32-39)

32 And Jesus called His disciples to Him, and said, "**I feel compassion** for the multitude, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not wish to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way." 33 And the disciples said to Him, "Where would we get so many loaves in a desolate place to satisfy such a great multitude?" 34 And Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven, and a few small fish." 35 And He directed the multitude to sit down on the ground; 36 and He took the seven loaves and the fish; and giving thanks, He broke them and started **giving them to the disciples, and the disciples {in turn,} to the multitudes.** 37 And they all ate, and were satisfied, and they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, seven large baskets full. 38 And those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 And sending away the multitudes, He got into the boat, and came to the region of Magadan."

- The tender care of pastor Jesus working through his disciples is a powerful image for us.
- The lesson we take from this story is that we participate with Christ in the ministry of service which is a part of our worship response to God. Rom.12:1-2 makes this point.

Insights and Lessons from this chapter

1. In our worship we can too easily:
 - Criticize others
 - Concentrate on the externals
 - Seek to be entertained
 - Forget what Christ has done
 - Be a spectator to God's grace.