

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

Year A - Proper 15, Text: Matthew 15:21-28
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In Matthew 15:1–9, Jesus deals with Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, who rebuke Him for permitting His disciples to ignore the tradition of the elders in relation to washing hands prior to eating. Jesus responds by pointing out that they themselves manipulate God’s commandments regarding honoring and obeying parents.

In verses 15:10–20, Jesus points out that what people place into their mouth and eat does not defile them; after all, it eventually passes through the body into the sewer. Defilement comes from the evil thoughts and deeds that arise within the heart and flow forth to life in the world.

Verse 15:21: This verse points out that the woman was a Canaanite. In Mark 7:24–30, the woman is referred to as a Gentile Syrophenician. Tyre and Sidon, referred to in Matthew 15:21, are in Syrophenicia (modern-day Lebanon). In Matthew’s narrative, these pagan cities have been referred to previously as more open to God than the Jewish cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida (11:20–22).

Bear in mind that in Deuteronomy 7:1–2, the ancient Israelites were told to destroy seven nations that lived on and within their borders (i.e. the Canaanites). They are never to make any kind of covenant with them or show them any mercy. To be aware of this is to understand more clearly that Matthew’s account of Jesus showing mercy toward an unclean Canaanite woman and healing her demon-possessed daughter contains a powerful message.

Verse 15:22: This Gentile Canaanite woman calls out to Jesus and addresses Him as “Lord, Son of David.” This is a remarkable confession from a non-Jew! In the Gospels, it is often people such as this woman and the blind who address Jesus in this manner (see Mark 10:46–52). The woman’s story parallels that of the Roman centurion (8:5–13). At the same time, her attitude is the opposite of the authorities from Jerusalem (verses 1–20).

Verse 15:23: Jesus has already exorcised demons in Gentile territory (v. 8:28–34) and Galilee (v. 9:32; 12:22–23). However, He now meets the woman’s request with stony silence. Not only that, but Jesus’ disciples ask Him to send her away, “for she keeps shouting after us.”

Verse 15:24: Jesus’ first words seem to be a chilling “No!” He states that His mission, like that of John the Baptist, is to turn Israel (a nation that looked on itself as God’s “chosen people”) wholeheartedly to God, and only rarely and exceptionally does He have contact with Gentiles.

Verse 15:25-26: But the woman approaches Jesus, kneels before Him, and renews her plea. Jesus responds with a seemingly harsh little parable, “It is not fair to take the children’s food (gifts for the people of God) and throw it to the dogs” (Gentiles; see 7:6).

Verse 15:27: The woman humbly plays along with Jesus’ seemingly harsh image and urges Him to take it one step further: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (see 8:11–12). Her point is: God’s bounty is large enough for all creatures great and small, near and far — for both Israel and all other nations. Of course Jesus knows this to be true.

Verse 15:28: It would seem that this quick-minded woman has both wit and wisdom. Jesus comments about her great faith and grants her request. The daughter is healed immediately!

The narrative extols God’s faithfulness to Israel, and depicts the power of boundary-crossing faith. And Jesus showed mercy toward one of whom the Jews were told they should not show mercy! His kingdom would be different

