

The Book of Matthew Study Guide

Matthew 15-16

15:1-20

This chapter begins with a resumption of the dispute between Yeshua and the Pharisees over the interpretation of Torah. The issue at hand is over Yeshua's disciples not washing their hands before eating bread according to the tradition of the elders of Israel (v. 2).

The phrase, "tradition of the elders" refers to the interpretations of Torah that developed over time. It later became known as the oral tradition, and then was put down in writing during the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. That writing was called the *Mishnah*. Additional rabbis subsequently gave their own commentary on the *Mishnah* during the 3rd-5th centuries, which was also written down in what was called the *Gemara*. Then the *Mishnah* and *Gemara* were compiled together in the multi-volume work called the *Talmud*. Each volume, called a tractate, deals with a separate topic, like Shabbat, the feasts, marriage, etc. This complexity is further enhanced because there are two versions of the *Talmud* – the larger one written in the land of Babylon and a smaller one written in Jerusalem. Each one follows the same format – *Mishnah* and *Gemara* compiled together and divided into tractates. Altogether a great number of rabbinic opinions has accumulated and forms the basis for Judaism today.

But this rabbinic complexity was already well-established in Yeshua's day. It just had not been written down yet – it was passed on orally from generation to generation. So this "tradition of the leaders" and the later *Talmud* accomplished the same thing – it created an additional burden of obligations that the original Torah did not make.

The washing of hands was one of them. It is now recorded in the *Talmud* in the tractate *Yadayim* ("hands"). This was not a mere issue of hygiene. It was a matter of ritual cleanness. The Pharisees of the second temple period and the later rabbis based their argument of Lev 15:11 –

"Likewise, whomever the one with the discharge touches without having rinsed his hands in water shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until evening."

This entire chapter deals with obvious bodily discharges of different kinds that make you ritually unclean and it makes no mention of breaking bread or eating. But the rabbis took it two steps further by saying that washing refers to everyone, not just someone with an obvious discharge, and it specifically applies to washing before eating, in order to preserve ritual purity. So they applied it in a more burdensome way than the Torah originally intended. Then, once you head down that path, it becomes easy to add to the burden. Here is what the "tradition of the elders" of Yeshua's day required:

Mishnah Yadayim – On The Washing of Hands Before Eating Bread

- 1:1 A minimum of a quarter log of water must be poured over the hands (a log is the volume of 6 eggs).
- 1:2 Water must only be poured from vessels that are unbroken and covered with a lid. Water must not be poured from a ladle, the bung of a barrel, or cupped hands.
- 1:3 Water must not be used if its color has changed or if it is unfit for cattle to drink.
- 1:4 Water must not be used if it was first used to scrub the vessel.

- 1:5 Anyone who pours the water is acceptable, including deaf-mutes, imbeciles, children or apes (some rabbis dispute the latter two categories).
- 2:1 Water may be poured over one hand and then the other, or both hands at the same time.
- 2:2 If insufficient water (less than 1/4 log) is poured out and a second washing is needed to meet the volume requirement, and a loaf comes into contact with the first water, it is unclean. If the washing fails to remove a splinter or a piece of gravel, they remain unclean. But if a water creature falls onto the hands when pouring, the hands are clean.
- 2:3 If the water is poured beyond the wrist and flows back over the hand, it is unclean. Water may be poured over five or less persons at a time as long as their hands do not touch each other.
- 2:4 According to Rabbi Jose: If his hands were clean and there were two unclean loaves before him and there was a doubt whether he touched them or not; or if his hands were unclean and there were two clean loaves before him and there was a doubt whether he touched them or not; or if one of his hands was unclean and the other clean and there were two clean loaves before him and he touched one of them and there was a doubt whether he touched it with the unclean hand or with the clean hand; or if his hands were clean and there were two loaves before him one of which was unclean and the other clean and he touched one of them and there was a doubt whether he touched the unclean one or the clean one; or if one of his hands was unclean and the other clean and there were two loaves before him one of which was unclean and the other clean, and he touched both of them, and there is a doubt whether the unclean hand touched the unclean loaf or whether the clean hand touched the clean loaf or whether the clean hand touched the unclean loaf or whether the unclean hand touched the clean loaf, the hands remain in the same state as they were before and the loaves remain in the same state as they were before.
- 3:1 That which has been rendered unclean by a father of uncleanness conveys uncleanness to the hands, but that which has been rendered unclean by an offspring of uncleanness does not convey unclean ness to the hands.
- 3:2 One unwashed hand conveys uncleanness to the washed hand.
- 3:3 If a washed hand touches the straps of *tefillin* it becomes unclean.
- 3:4 If a washed hand touches the margin of a scroll above or below the words, or at the beginning or the end of a scroll, it becomes unclean.
- 3:5 If a washed hand touches a scroll of the Song of Songs or Ecclesiastes, it becomes unclean.
- 4:5 If a washed hand comes into contact with the Aramaic sections of Ezra and Daniel, it becomes unclean.

Yeshua answers the question of the Pharisees by showing how any tradition of men that violates God's commandments is wrong. He gives the example of the practice of the Pharisees who give their money for temple worship and have none left to care for their aged parents. And in so doing, they violate the commandment to "honor your father and mother" and not to speak evil of them (Ex 20:12; 21:17). Their tradition regarding giving to the temple at the expense of their parents invalidates the Word of God (v. 6). And the same is true regarding the mandated washing of hands before eating.

This does not mean all traditions should be rejected; just the ones that violate the Word in some manner. i.e. Yeshua honored the traditions associated with Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) that involved pouring water on the altar and lighting massive menorahs in the Temple courtyard by

saying He is the living water and the light of the world (Jn 7:38; 8:12). Our calling as disciples is to follow the example of Yeshua. So we, too, can evaluate the traditions of men by the same standard. We should reject them if they violate God's Word but may accept them if there is no conflict.

v. 11 – Yeshua uses a figure of speech to describe the difference between the truth of God and the traditions of men.

What enters the mouth = God's truth (originates from God)

Psalm 34:8

“O taste and see that the LORD is good.”

What proceeds out of the mouth = the traditions of men (originates from men). So God's truth does not defile us, but the traditions of men do defile us.

v. 20 – He confirms that principle by applying specifically to the situation at hand regarding unwashed hands. And we can do the same today if we do so in the same manner as Yeshua.

15:21-29

Yeshua then heads north along the coast to Lebanon, where He encounters a Canaanite woman (Gentile). She appeals to Him, seeking help for her demon-possessed daughter. But He initially ignores her, then says in v. 24 that He has been “sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” His call to make disciples of all nations would come later. So she uses a creative approach by arguing in the same style as Yeshua by using figurative language.

v. 27 – “even dogs feed on the crumbs that fall from their master's table.” In this image, the master would be God or Yeshua. And the dogs would be Gentiles, which is consistent with the perspective within Judaism since Gentiles were considered to be unclean and dogs are unclean animals.

So the idea is that even though Yeshua had a specific primary calling, He should be able to give at least some attention to other needs (crumbs). He, then, honors her request and heals her daughter. This informs us about the way that we can approach God with our concerns. We should reason in the same way that Yeshua does. And we should acknowledge the truth of the circumstances, while also including other truths.

15:30-39

Yeshua returns to the Galilee where more miracles are performed, including another feeding of a multitude (4,000 men plus women and children) using a few loaves and fishes.

16:1-4

This chapter begins with another repeat encounter. Just as in chapter 12, a group of Pharisees ask for a sign and Yeshua tells them it will be Jonah, although this time He does not add the specific details of Jonah being in the belly of a sea monster for 3 days and nights, which is an allusion to Yeshua's coming death and resurrection. But notice also in v. 3 that Yeshua comments on the inability of the Pharisees to “discern the signs of the times.” This is an inability for many people today as well.

16:5-12

Then Yeshua warns His disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees, which is clearly figurative

language once again. In v. 12 the disciples understand that to refer to the teaching of the religious authorities of that day. But that does not completely describe why Yeshua would use the symbol of leaven. In keeping with the way that leavening works and what leaven represents in Scripture, we can conclude that this symbol indicate that the teaching of the Pharisees was sinful and had spread throughout Israel.

16:13-20

This next episode takes place in Caesarea Philippi, which is an area that is known today as Baniyas. It is where the Jordan River springs out of the rocks at the base of Mt Hermon. For the first time Yeshua stimulates a discussion on His identity. Coupled with his confrontation with the Pharisees right before this, three kinds of people can be distinguished when it comes to Yeshua – Pharisees, the crowd, and disciples.

- The Pharisees represent the non-Christian religious institutions of this world. They call Yeshua a blasphemer and deny that He has any authority.
- The crowd represents the great number of people in the world who have some familiarity with Yeshua. They call Him a prophet, which is a term of respect, but describes a distant relationship to Yeshua and an incomplete understanding of who He is.
- The disciples represent people who truly believe in Him. In v. 16 Peter declares two aspects of Yeshua’s identity that are essential to that belief. He is the Christ/Messiah, which means He is the Redeemer who is our atonement for sin (Isa 53). He is also the Son of God, meaning He is God and Lord over our lives.

Yeshua then reveals the implications of Peter’s declaration. Naturally He uses figurative language, and that has led to some confusion among readers of the Bible. When Yeshua says in v. 18, “you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church,” Roman Catholicism interprets this to mean that the church as an institution will be built on the authority of Peter, followed by the Popes. But the problem with that interpretation is that it ignores context.

- The context of Yeshua’s way of communication shows a preference for figurative language. He uses a play on words with *Petros* (the Gr. word for the Heb. name Kefa) and *petra* (the Gr. word for “rock”). His emphasis is on the *petra* (the rock), not the *Petros* (Peter).
- The grammatical context shows that Yeshua’s declaration comes immediately after Peter stating that Yeshua was Messiah and God, which must be placed at the center of the interpretation. Notice that Yeshua calls it “My church,” not Peter’s church or the apostles or popes. If He had intended to support the Catholic position, Yeshua would have said, “upon Petros” or “upon you I will build your church.”
- The geographic context is also important. They were standing in an area where there is a massive rock cliff that was known as the “Rock of the Gods.” It was like a natural outdoor temple for pagans. Shrines were built into the rock for deities, especially the mythological god Pan (half-man half-goat). The name modern name Baniyas is derived from Pan. There is a large cave in the “Rock of the Gods” where sacrifices and decadent fertility rites took place. In those days the headwater of the Jordan River came directly out of the cave, but today it flows from rocks beneath the cave. The cave was known as the “Gates of Hades” because it was believed that Baal would enter and depart the underworld from there.

So Yeshua had brought the disciples quite some distance to this spot intentionally in order to show them a rock that represented the religious institutions of men, and how corrupt that

was. So it is very apparent by this context that He was not advocating another religious institution based on the authority of men. In fact He says “the gates of Hades” just like the cave right before them “would not overpower” what He was building. In other words, the religious institution would not ultimately prevail. He was contrasting it with His intention to build the community of the faithful based entirely on the declaration that He is Messiah who saves us from our sins and the divine Lord of all.

So that should further inform our understanding of the nature of what Yeshua was building in v. 18 – the Gr. word *ekklesia*. In most English Bibles *ekklesia* is translated today as church. It is derived from the Heb. word *kahal*, which generally means, “assembly, congregation or community.” The basic meaning of those English terms involves people, not an institution or a building.

The earliest translations of the Bible into English, like that of William Tyndale, rendered *ekklesia* as “congregation.” The Geneva New Testament of 1557 was the first to use the word “church” instead. That decision was based on an evolution of the word. The Gr. word *kuriakos* means “belonging to the Lord.” It is used only two times in Scripture – 1 Cor 11:20 where it refers to “the Lord’s supper” (supper belonging to the Lord) and in Rev 1:10 where it refers to “the Lord’s day” (day belonging to the Lord). It came into old English as *cirice* (pronounced kee-ree-ke) and later as *churche* (kerke) as a reference to anything that belonged to God, including buildings used for worship. When the Geneva translation group supervised by William Whittingham came to the word *ekklesia*, they decided to use church rather than congregation in order to give the sense that the people belonged to God. The next key translation was the Bishop’s Bible published by the institutional Church of England in 1568, and it also used “church.” Later, when the KJV was produced in 1611, not only was “church” employed again, it was mandated by King James himself. His instructions stated:

Article 1. The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the Bishops Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit.

Article 3. The old Ecclesiastical Words to be kept, viz. the Word Church not to be translated Congregation etc.

But the problem is that this term took on the meanings of buildings and institutions, the very thing that Yeshua was teaching against. It is my conviction that the purity of Yeshua’s message on that day in Caesarea Philippi would have been much more evident if the translators had remained consistent in the use of “assembly, congregation or community.”

16:21-28

For the first time Yeshua reveals what lay ahead in terms of His suffering and death at the hands of the religious institution.

v. 22 – Peter resists.

v. 23 – Yeshua responds in such a way that makes it apparent His followers can misunderstand God’s plans, and Satan can be misled us by using our “good intentions.”

vv 24-26 – Yeshua then reveals what lies ahead for His disciples and all who follow Him in terms of their own persecution.