

## ***“Watch Your Mouth”***

*Matthew 14:34-15:28*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 1, 2013

Well we've just celebrated the Thanksgiving holiday and for many of us that meant time with extended family, which means that some of you may have discovered why they say the two things you should never discuss at a party are politics and religion. People can get very touchy about religion because it's a very personal matter. Not only that, but if you look at the news, most major conflicts around the world involve religion.

Sometimes when I meet people and they find out I'm a pastor they'll say something like, "I believe in God but I don't like organized religion." They're usually shocked, then, when I answer, "You should come check out our church. I don't care much for religion, either and we're not really that organized." This morning we see that Jesus himself didn't seem to care for the organized religion of his day and they didn't care much for him either.

As we look at this passage, it seems like Jesus is getting a bit snippy with people. It's as if he's having a bad day and starts taking it out on other people. Who could blame him, really. For some time Jesus has been trying to get away for some rest and he's always interrupted. First he tried going home to Nazareth to see his family. There he faced rejection and had to leave. About that time he heard about the death of his cousin John the Baptist and so he sailed across the Sea of Galilee to find some peace and quiet. But the crowds figured out where he was going and beat him there. This is where he fed the five thousand. So he heads back across the lake, walking on the water in the middle of the night, coming to Gennesaret, which was an open plain out in the country, not far from Capernaum, which was his home base.

When he arrives in Gennesaret some of the people recognize him and Matthew tells us at the end of chapter 14 that they send word all around the region so that people bring their

sick for Jesus to heal. By this time Jesus and his disciples must be exhausted and they cannot find anywhere to rest. So who could blame him for being short tempered. And then the Pharisees show up and want to talk about washing hands and it seems like Jesus blows it way out of proportion, almost picking a fight. That story is followed by the encounter with the Canaanite woman and Jesus calls her a dog. So is he just having a bad day or is there something else going on here? As you can guess, I think there's lots more going on in these passages that affects our lives today.

Many pastors and commentators treat these two stories as separate and so you will find separate sermons or chapters in books on Jesus' dealing with the Pharisees and then the Canaanite woman. But I think it's important that Matthew has put them together and as we look at them I think you'll see why. Remember that the focus of Matthew has shifted from Jesus teaching the crowds of people to him teaching his disciples. So these two passages are together because they show Jesus teaching an important point to his disciples and to us.

Let's look first at the conflict with the Pharisees. Chapter 15 begins, "Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.'" First of all, notice that the Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem to meet with Jesus. That was quite a trip. What we have is an official investigating committee sent to stop Jesus from breaking the rules. In this case it's about washing hands.

The issue here is not sanitary. In the first century they probably had little understanding about germs. Instead, this was about ritual cleansing. The Old Testament required the priests to ceremonially wash their hands and feet before serving in the Temple. As the years went by the religious leaders expanded that to

require all Jews to participate in the ritual cleansing before every meal. They had lots of similar rules about everything. The Pharisees in particular were all about the rules. They believed that if the whole nation of Israel would keep all of God's laws perfectly for one day then the Messiah would come. Ironically, they came all that way from Jerusalem to Galilee to argue with the Messiah about those rules.

Jesus, as usual, answers their question with a question. He turns the conversation around to point out that they are hypocrites. They are worried about breaking the traditions of the elders but at the same time those traditions allow people to break the commandments of God. The fifth commandment says, "honor your father and mother." We would certainly say that honoring our parents would include taking care of them if we are able to do so. But the Pharisees had a law that allowed people to dedicate their money to the Temple so that they didn't have to share it with their parents. They didn't have to actually give the money to the Temple, only pledge to give it when they die. So people were able to use that "loophole" to get out of the commandment.

Jesus in effect answers that there are no loopholes in God's commandments. Obeying God is not about checking off a list of things you have to do and another list of things you shouldn't do. It's not about how you wash your hands. Jesus says that participating in the Kingdom of Heaven is about your heart. But the Pharisees loved their rules and traditions more than they loved God, which leads to self-righteousness and false religion. Christians are not immune to this. Church history is littered with individuals and groups who become more concerned with their rules or traditions than with knowing and following Jesus.

The disciples come to Jesus and let him know that the Pharisees were offended by Jesus' remarks. Jesus tells them not to pay any attention to them. This is serious because these are the acknowledged religious leaders.

They are the ones that are thought to be closer to God. Jesus says that instead they are plants that "the Father has not planted" and in the end they will be "rooted up." They are counterfeit Christians. They are blind and they lead others astray. This is a good point to remind you that even in churches today there are pastors and teachers who claim to be sent from God and yet they teach things that are contrary to the revealed Word of God. They deny that Jesus is God incarnate, they dismiss the resurrection as untrue, and they want people to believe that things Scripture calls sins are actually good. It is important for every believer to study the Bible, know the truth, and hold religious leaders accountable.

So Jesus uses this opportunity to teach the crowd that has gathered. He says, "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." He then explains what he means to his disciples. It's not what you eat, or eating with unwashed hands, that makes you unclean before God. It's what's in your heart. All sin is a matter of the heart before it is an action. Jesus gives us a list of some of those sins – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These basically follow the pattern of the second half of the Ten Commandments. In fact, these are the things commandments that immediately follow honoring our parents.

But he precedes this list of actions with this: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts." God is not just concerned about sinful actions. He's concerned about our thoughts and desires. Those are the things that make us unclean. The book of James warns us plenty about this. He calls the tongue a restless evil and says, "With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God." Our words have the power to cause tremendous pain and those words come from our hearts. At the same time our words can bring great joy and can build people up and those words come from our

hearts as well. Love and hate are both matters of the heart.

Jesus once again tries to get away, this time he goes where he assumes nobody will know who he is and no one would follow him. Verse 21 says he “withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” Jesus went where Jews didn’t usually go. He went to Gentile territory and immediately a Gentile woman comes to him crying and asking him to heal her daughter. What happens next would seem to be one of the most puzzling things in all the gospels. Jesus ignores her. But she keeps calling out to him. The disciples are getting annoyed and they ask Jesus to “send her away.” It would seem, however, that they are asking Jesus to do what the woman is asking so that she will leave.

Jesus replies, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” He’s saying, “I don’t serve your kind.” The woman is not deterred. She comes and kneels before Jesus saying, “Lord, help me.” Jesus gets even more harsh, saying, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus calls the woman a dog. There are people who have walked away from the Christian faith after reading this. They say, “I don’t want any part of a religion that treats people that way.” It’s sad because they have missed the point here.

It was common in those days for Jews to refer to Gentiles as dogs. They meant it as an insult. The Gentiles who lived around Israel knew it, too. This woman would have known it. But there’s a twist here. The word Jesus used for dog refers to small house pets, not the wild dogs that roamed around, which was the usual derogatory term for Gentiles. Jesus is taking this opportunity to use a play on words and he does it for two reasons. First, he wants to test the woman’s resolve. Is she going to persist or will she just go away mad. The woman clearly persists. She calls Jesus Lord three times and she refers to him as “Son of David,” which is a messianic title. This woman

recognizes Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. The other reason Jesus does this is to teach his disciples a lesson.

When Jesus says it’s not right to take the bread from the children, who represent Jews, and give it to the dogs, the woman replies, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” What Jesus is doing in his conversation with this woman is using the language that the Pharisees would use. The woman catches on and plays along and Jesus ends up healing her daughter.

Here’s the point. According to the Pharisees standards, Jesus is defiled merely by talking to this Gentile – and a woman at that. Jesus shows by his actions how bankrupt that view is. The reason these stories are together is because Matthew wants us to see the great contrast. The people who are supposed to be expecting the Messiah – the religious leaders of Israel – instead reject him because he doesn’t obey *their* rules. But this foreign, pagan woman has what Jesus calls “great faith.”

Remember how we defined faith. It consists first of knowledge of who Jesus is and second an agreement or acceptance of that knowledge. Finally, faith involves trusting Jesus. This woman knows that Jesus is the Messiah, she accepts that as true, she puts her complete trust in Him, and she is persistent. She didn’t have religion but she had faith.

How about you? Do you have that kind of faith? Or do you simply have religion? Do you come before God with merely clean hands? Or do you come with a clean heart? Do you attend worship and pot luck dinners out of a sense of obligation? Or do you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Are you more like the Pharisees or like the foreign woman? My prayer is that, like this Canaanite woman, you will see your true standing before God and continuously come and kneel before the Lord Jesus saying, “Lord, help me.” And then one day you will hear him say, “Great is your faith!”

*Amen*