



Chapter 15

Legendary UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden, had a well-documented practice of teaching his players how to properly put on their socks and lace up their shoes. Really. We can only imagine the confusion and protest on his players' minds that first practice!

Icebreaker:

1. What's your reaction whenever you're asked to do things but don't understand *why*? Share an example of when this has happened to you.

Why? is the natural question. In an era of more primitive footwear, Coach Wooden knew the very real possibility that blisters could bench even his most talented athletes. He had a purpose in every detail, which isn't surprising for someone who won 10 national championships in 12 years.

Now, imagine if Wooden was so zealous for blister prevention that he never moved beyond lessons about socks and shoes. Blisters would have been avoided alright, but so would've winning! In such an absurd case, *a means would have become the end*. How foolish! Welcome to the start of Chapter 15.

Verses 1-20

This section begins with a *why?* question of its own. The "tradition of the elders" in v. 2 refers to the Pharisees set of rules on how to live out the OT law, or Torah. These rules likely began as a well-intentioned means for instructing the people of Israel on how to live out the Torah. Over time, though, these traditions took on a life of their own, becoming a heavy burden of self-righteous rules that obscured rather than illuminated the OT law. *A means had become the end*.

2. Think about and share examples of how human rules can become "sacred" so that they take on a life of their own.

The question posed to Jesus is about the elders' tradition rather than God's law, and Jesus's reply question puts them on the defensive. The tradition they were so careful to uphold had become a source for violating God's laws!

Jesus raises a different issue with His question. The OT law commands children to honor parents (see Exod. 20:12 and 21:17) in both actions and words. The human-made tradition, though, included a sly "law-abiding" way to avoid this responsibility. In practice, the tradition had usurped God's law.

3. It's easy to criticize the Pharisees and their human-made rules, but we're kidding ourselves if we don't think we also have a tendency to follow their self-righteous example. What could actually be appealing about human-made rules and traditions?
4. Look at verses 17-20. Does Jesus's emphasis on the heart as the source of defilement, rather than the cleanliness of our hands, comfort or trouble you?

Verses 21-28

There's a not-so-subtle theme of opposition and rejection here. Jesus has been opposed and rejected by the religious leaders and He has rejected them. Tyre and Sidon represent not only a geographic change (further north), but also a new audience.

The Canaanite woman is most definitely not someone we should expect to model faith! As a "Canaanite," she's a Gentile. As a woman, she's on the fringe of society. Even so, she, of all people, identifies Jesus's true identity as "Lord, Son of David." She, of all people, knows something about Jesus's goodness that others have missed.

Jesus's response—or lack thereof—can seem cruel. Why won't He acknowledge her? Then, why is He so exclusive when He finally does speak? Recall the *Missional Discourse* of chapter 10 and how priority was given to the people of Israel. That same priority is perhaps imbedded in Jesus's response. We see here as in other places (e.g., 8:28-34), though, how Jesus's mission isn't exclusively for the lost sheep of Israel.

5. This woman could have easily given up on her request to Jesus, yet she keeps at it. What does her example teach us about true faith?

6. What are you praying for God to do in your life, and what would it look like for you to follow this woman's example?

Verses 29-39

There are a number of similarities in these verses to the miraculous feeding of Matt. 14:13-21, including the general pattern of Jesus healing the crowd and then miraculously supplying food. Commentators point out how this crowd of 4,000 likely included more Gentiles than the previous crowd of 5,000. It's possible that these two accounts are meant to work together to stress the comprehensive nature of the Messiah's mission—"to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). What is most clear, however, is the sovereignty of God over all things! Our human limitations are not His limitations. Our lack of resources are not a lack for Him.

7. The disciples ask, "Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?" They sound overwhelmed. What great need overwhelms you right now, and how can you draw hope from this miracle?

Some have understood these two feeding miracles as a kind of "hors d'oeuvres" or a foretaste of the Messianic banquet at the end of the age (also referenced in Matt. 8:11; see also Rev. 19:9). Once again, Jesus is offering supernatural and tangible tastes of what His Kingdom entails.

8. Out of the miracles we've seen so far in Matthew, which excites you the most? A healing? Casting out demons? Calming a storm? Feeding a crowd? Why do you think it's most exciting for you and how does it offer us a glimpse of God's coming Kingdom?

Tying the Bow

Recall the opening scene in this chapter. The religious leaders are trying to obtain righteousness through their traditions. Jesus knows this is a setup for failure because our hearts—not our dirty hands—are the real problem. In other words, we are helpless to resolve our problem on our own. Like the Canaanite woman, we are in a desperate situation calling for desperate faith. Like the hungry crowd, our surroundings are spiritually desolate and we can't simply feed ourselves. God must intervene. God must act.

9. How have you seen God deliver you through desperate, helpless circumstances? Take time to share this with your group and then pray together, thanking God for doing what only He can do!