

“Ministry in Gentile Regions” Lecture 13

Happy New Year! While I *enjoyed* our Christmas break, *over* enjoyed Christmas food, I had *mega* joy thinking about seeing you all today/tonight.

I hope you got everything you wanted from Santa. I didn't. I asked Santa for a big bank account and a thin body. He mixed it up again this year.

Let's get serious shall we?

Matthew, Mark and Luke recorded Jesus' compassion, intelligence, power and divinity as Jesus broke down ethnic barriers, performed innovative healings, dined alfresco with thousands of Gentiles, said we aren't what we eat and went toe to-toe with the religious elite. How can anyone resist learning more about the unpredictable Jesus? Additionally, I could almost hear Jesus' passion when He addressed traditions verses God's commands and that defilement has inside roots that produce outside fruits.

➤ **God's Commands vs. Human Traditions**

Jesus' popularity was soaring. Multitudes flocked to hear Him, to have their sick healed and maybe get a free meal. The powerful religious parties, the scribes and Pharisees, were fierce enemies but were united to publicly discredit Jesus. They arrived from Jerusalem, ready and waiting when Jesus and His disciples set foot upon the shore of Gennesaret. They had a matter of *critical* concern to discuss with Him. They wanted to know why Jesus' disciples didn't wash up before dinner.

Jews were required, not by God, but by religious leaders, to follow manmade traditions handed down through generations. One tradition was the ceremony of hand washing. It was to be done in a very specific way before each meal and *especially* after a trip to the marketplace where a “clean” Jew may come in contact with an “unclean” Gentile and be contaminated. These washings cleaned no more than imaginary Gentile cooties. Many of their traditions altered and were even considered more important, than God's commandments.

When this delegation from Jerusalem came to pick a fight with Jesus, His gloves came off. The time had come to confront them and Jesus went on the offensive. He said it was *they* who were breaking God's law with their traditions and He chose a *doozy* of an example.

Religious leaders said their material assets could be labeled as “Corban” which meant dedicated to the temple. Those assets then, could *not* be used for such things as paying debts, giving to the poor, or even helping parents in need. And *that* violated God's commandment to honor one's father and mother. The irony is

they could continue to *use* their assets for personal gain until *they* chose to donate them. Jesus said that was only one of many ways they distorted God's Law. Oh, but Jesus wasn't finished. He called them hypocrites. They performed worship from their lips, not their hearts. Jesus condemned them by quoting what God said in Isaiah, "*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.*" (Isaiah 29:13). True worship must come from the heart - directed by God's truth, not man's personal ideas. Traditions - manmade teachings - that contradict or are held *above* God's Word – to God are empty words from the lips.

The disciples were concerned. They asked Jesus something like, "Jesus, did you know you offended those guys?" Of course He knew. The religious leaders valued traditions *they* created above the very Law *God* wrote! They were blind, leading others who were also blind. How could they teach spiritual truths if they were *blind* to the truth? Like the Pharisees, those today who distort God's Word are headed for the pit of destruction, and their blind followers will be right behind them. Comical, but sad.

➤ **GETTING TO THE HEART OF DEFILEMENT**

The religious leaders also had rules about being defiled, so Jesus called the crowd together and taught another spiritual truth. "*What goes into someone's mouth doesn't defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.*" (Matt 15:11).

Well, now the disciples *really* needed some private time with Jesus. Did He say it no longer mattered what they ate? That God is more interested in what's in the heart than what goes in the stomach? That *sin* defiles, not *food*? They were trained from birth that consuming non-kosher food separated them from God. This was an astonishingly new teaching for Orthodox Jews. Jesus' enemies understood that He was declaring null and void the entire Mosaic system of "clean and unclean" foods. He was breaking down one of the walls that separated Jews from Gentiles.

Jesus clarified *true defilement*, listing all kinds of sin. Sin that comes out of the mouth, including words and behavior, *all* originates in the heart. Every human heart has the root of every human sin in it. That's our nature. We *want* to be good but can't on our own because our natural impulse is to sin. Chuck Swindoll put it this way. "A *pig's* nature is to roll in mud. You can take a pig out of slop, scrub him, put a pink ribbon around his neck, dust him up with baby powder, spray perfume behind his ears, and dress him in silk. But as soon as you let him out, right back to the slop he'll run. Why? Because he has a pig's nature. *Our* nature is that we can't

stay away from sin." Jeremiah 17:9 says, "*The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked.*" In Romans 7, Paul says *only* through Jesus can we be rescued from spiritual death because of our sinful nature. Only Jesus, the Chief Physician, can cure the heart disease of sin. *1 Samuel 16:7 says, "the LORD looks at the heart."* When the Lord examines *our* hearts what does He see?

It's always been about the heart: We *believe* from the heart (Romans 10:9-10); *love* from the heart (Matthew 22:37); *sing* from the heart (Colossians 3:16); *obey* from the heart (Ephesians 6:6); *give* from the heart (2 Corinthians 9:7). No wonder David prayed, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God*" (Psalm 51:10) *Some* traditions remind us of our rich heritage and bond our generations, but we must constantly beware that traditions are *not* to replace God's truth. Traditions are external. God's truth must be internal - in the heart.

➤ **JESUS AMONG THE GENTILES**

Jesus left Galilee to get away from His enemies, spend time teaching His disciples, and get a little R and R. Up to this time, Jesus' focus had been on the lost sheep of Israel but by walking across the border into the land of the Gentiles, Jesus demonstrated God's kingdom knows no ethnic, racial, national, or gender barriers. He performed miracles among the Gentiles, demonstrating God's plan of salvation for *all* and that no one is so unclean they cannot receive the touch of God.

Although Jesus was incognito, the fame of His healing power preceded Him. A desperate mother discovered He was there and came to Him for help. As we review this account, let's keep in mind that our Lord's response was not to *destroy* the woman's faith, but for her to *verbalize* it.

Her daughter was demon possessed and "suffered terribly". One can only imagine what that was like for the daughter and her mother. Being a Gentile, it was unacceptable for her to approach a Jewish rabbi, yet she addressed Him by His Jewish Messianic title, Son of David. Jesus was silent. This Gentile mom was determined. She cried out and begged Jesus to heal her daughter. The disciples wanted to send her away, but she approached Jesus, knelt before Him, and pleaded, *Lord, help me*. Doesn't that three-word prayer say everything sometimes? We can use it when we're scared, when we're in a hurry, when we're sick, when we rise in the morning, when we're driving, *especially* when babysitting children. There's no situation in which we can't utter, "Lord, help me."

Jesus' response to the woman may seem shocking. He told her He was sent to first feed the children and it wasn't right to take their food and give it to the dogs. Scholars of the Greek language explain this unusual interaction between the

God of love and a person in need. The *type* of dog Jesus meant was *significantly* important in this exchange. The word Jesus used for dogs meant little pet dogs - not filthy scavengers that ran the streets. Basically what Jesus said was that He was sent to God's chosen people - His children the Jews. They must be fed first, that is, be offered salvation, before the little puppies, the Gentiles.

The woman's clever response was that she did not deny the children, the Jews, their special place in God's plan. All she wanted were a few crumbs of blessing from the table. Jesus commended her faith and sent her home to find her daughter healed.

The interaction between the Jewish Messiah and the Gentile woman is profoundly important to all Gentile Christians. Jesus' mission was to come to the Jews first. His plan unfolded to include Gentiles to also receive the Gospel as it fell like crumbs from the children's table. The Apostle Paul confirmed that truth.

"...it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile." Romans 1:16 and, *"Gentiles are citizens along with all God's holy people. You are members of God's family."* (Ephesians 2:19) and, *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* (Romans 10:13).

➤ **JESUS, INNOVATIVE HEALER**

Throughout His ministry, Jesus used different ways to heal. He healed with a word, without a word, in response to one's faith, in response to the faith of another, those who asked, those *He* approached, long distance healing and even when the hem of His robe was touched. Jesus customized His healing methods for the person and the situation. Such was a healing while still in Gentile territory. People brought a man to Him who was deaf and could barely speak.

Jesus did something novel to enter this man's world of silence. He used "sign language". Being deaf, the man could not hear Jesus' words, but he could feel Jesus' fingers in his ears, which communicated that his hearing would be restored. Jesus put saliva on His fingers and touched the man's tongue, which communicated that his speech would be restored. Jesus' saliva wasn't needed to heal but He knew the people believed saliva had healing properties. These symbolic touches uniquely suited this man's need for healing.

Jesus looked to heaven, to His Father, the source of His power, and sighed deeply, which reflected profound compassion for the afflictions that enslaved the man. Jesus spoke one word, "Ephphatha" meaning, "be completely opened". Immediately, the man's ears received sound *and* he could speak clearly. The man did not hear Jesus say the word, but the created man heard the command of the

Creator and he was healed. Imagine, his deaf ears snapping open and all the sounds of the world suddenly pouring in with startling clarity. The man probably had *years*' worth of things to say and unloaded them in a nonstop verbal streak.

Scholars believe Jesus' fame limited His ability to freely move around and provide private teaching to His disciples, so He commanded the people to keep the healing under wraps. But they couldn't keep the miracle a secret. They were utterly astonished - beside themselves with amazement. We can't condone their disobedience but we certainly can understand their response.

➤ **A MULTITUDE'S MIRACLE MEAL**

Jesus' reputation attracted another massive crowd, which led to a second feeding miracle. Four thousand came to a desert setting in a Gentile region to hear Jesus and have their sick healed. I've been to *big* potlucks before, but dinner for 4000 people had to have been quite a sight. Actually, including women and children, it's estimated there may have been 8000-10,000 people there, and for three days they sat on the ground listening to Jesus as He healed thousands.

At the prospect of their illnesses healed, the people stayed with Jesus for three days; any food they brought, was gone. This was a desolate place in the wilderness - no nearby towns to get food. No Chick-fil-A's - certainly not if it was on the Sabbath! Jesus knew the crowd needed to go home, but He understood the implication of them traveling with no food.

Jesus once again involved His disciples in another teachable event. Jesus tells them of His concern for the crowd's hunger. This episode of feeding thousands of people should have been familiar to them. They should have responded, "Sure, Jesus! We remember the last time. It was an even *bigger* crowd and you fed everyone! We'll see if we can snag another little boy's lunch". Instead, they responded with a question, "How?" *Hello!* Did they actually forget the hours they shuttled baskets of food when Jesus fed the first multitude?

Jesus didn't respond negatively. He didn't expel them from His apostleship-training program. He simply clarified how much bread there was and then issued familiar instructions: Seat the people. Jesus blessed the food, the disciples distributed it, and the miracle kept happening in their hands. The results of *this* multitude feeding were the same as the first, "*They all ate and were satisfied.*" Seven loaves of bread and some fish were enough to feed the enormous crowd because it was in our Lord's hands and seven hamper-sized baskets of leftovers were collected. Jesus' used this miracle in an outdoor classroom to teach His

disciples they too needed to reflect *His* compassion to non-Jews who are also part of His Kingdom.

➤ **CLEAN, YET EMPTY, HOUSE**

Jesus left that region continuing His ministry. He told a short but powerful parable to illustrate the danger of living a *spiritually neutral life* – one not fully committed to Christ.

The Pharisees thought their “houses”, their hearts, were clean, but they were empty. Mere religious rituals won’t save. We must invite in the perfect tenant – Jesus the Christ – into our house, our life. Jesus said in Revelation 3:20, “*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.*”

There are two spiritual forces at work in this world. Everyone must choose to live either under God’s power or under Satan’s power. There can be no neutrality in the spiritual battle. Sitting on the spiritual fence actually means to oppose God.

Jesus said, “*He who is not with me is against me*” (Matt 12:30 and Luke 11:23) and, “*But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth!*” (Revelation 3:16). The person who only makes an outward profession of faith without a genuine commitment to Christ is at great risk of returning to the evils of this world.

➤ **JESUS TELLS A FISH STORY**

Opposition to Jesus was increasing. When he returned to Galilee the religious parties were again waiting for Him with a challenge to prove His divine authority. They wanted a sign from heaven - something more than just His “earthly” miracles of healing, feeding multitudes, casting out demons, calming storms, bringing the dead back to life. They wanted something from the sky – a spectacular display of power that would convince them He was indeed sent from God.

These scoffers had more evidence in front of them than any generation in history, yet they still refused to believe in Him. Jesus said they *would* get one more sign – one could say a *whale* of a sign - the “sign of Jonah”. Just as the prophet Jonah was “buried” in the belly of a big fish for three days and nights, so too would Jesus be “buried” three days and nights in the earth, that is, the tomb. And as Jonah was freed from the fish, Jesus would be freed from the tomb. Using this symbolism, Jesus was predicting His death, burial and resurrection. They would kill him, bury him, and think they were finally through with him. Yet, three days later, up from the grave He’d arise!

Jesus chose Jonah and another Old Testament story to further make His point. When Jonah preached to the Gentiles in Nineveh they repented and were spared. When a Gentile queen heard King Solomon's wisdom, she bowed in submission to the God of Israel. Although Jesus' generation witnessed His miracles, they didn't have as much faith as the Gentile Ninevites and the Gentile queen, both who will bear witness against them on judgment day.

➤ **LIGHT AND DARKNESS**

Jesus walked away from his critics who wanted another sign and carried on with His ministry. He told a parable about light and darkness. We often use light and dark metaphors, such as, "I didn't understand it and then the light went on" or, "I'm really in the dark about what that means". Light reveals and darkness conceals.

Jesus used imagery of lamps to explain. In those days, lights were clay lamps filled with oil. They didn't hide the lamps, but put them high on lampstands to illuminate even dark corners. The light is God's Word that shines in this dark world. *"Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path"* (Psalm 119:105). *"For a command is a lamp, teaching is a light, and corrective discipline is the way to life."* (Proverbs 6:23). Jesus continued. The eye is the lamp of the body and when it's healthy, meaning open to the Gospel, God's light will flood in. *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it"*. (John 1:5). However, He said, if the eye isn't healthy, meaning closed to the truth, the body is full of darkness - sin.

Luke 11:35 says, *"See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness."* This verse is just as applicable to us today. Satan's deception is for people to think they found light when in fact, it's darkness. Ever since Jesus uttered those words, false religions have expounded erroneous doctrines. Legalists say rules must be followed for salvation. Cults promise "enlightenment". False doctrines say, "All roads lead to heaven". Every belief apart from the true Gospel is another form of darkness. How do we get 20/20 vision to see and invite the True Light into our lives? Start with prayer and God's Word. Psalm 119:130 says, *"The teaching of your word gives light."* Let's pray for those whose eyes have not yet seen the light of Jesus.

➤ **IT'S NOT ALWAYS ABOUT FOOD**

Jesus and His disciples traveled across the Sea of Galilee. On the journey, Jesus warned them again about false teachings. I envisioned their boat trip this way: Jesus was reflecting on the confrontations with the leaders of religiosity. He

wanted to prepare His future apostles for their eventual clash with them and He tells them, *"Be on your guard against the yeast of those seeking spiritual and political power."* They hear "yeast", and think, *"Yeast. Hmmm that makes bread rise."* Discussion ensues among them. *"Speaking of bread, did you bring any? No? Neither did I! Oy-vey. What about our dinner? Hey, weren't there leftovers from the potluck?"*

Yeast: I can't bake with yeast and have it look *anything* like a bread product. My dad loves to tell *everyone* about me making him homemade biscuits. He ended up pinning one to his shirt.

Jesus was speaking of spiritual matters and the disciples were thinking of their stomachs. Again, their "little faith" kept them from understanding. Jesus asked penetrating questions, like, *"Don't you get it? How can you fail to see?"* They had short memories at times so He reminded them of the two occasions He miraculously fed thousands with abundant leftovers.

Food wasn't the issue in His warning about yeast. Yeast was a symbol of evil. Jesus used the visual aid of yeast to represent religious leaders' corrupt teachings. Just as yeast permeates bread dough, false teachings and manmade traditions are subtle and corrupting. Then, they finally got it. This is true today. If deviations from God's Word get into an individual or church, before long it can grow and corrupt. Jesus said, "Be on your guard."

➤ **BLIND MAN OF BETHSAIDA**

Jesus used a variety of approaches in His healings. When He arrived in Bethsaida He performed a unique healing. It occurred gradually though; not instantly.

A blind man was brought to Him. Compassionately, He took him by the hand and led him out of the village. Can you sense the tenderness, of being led, hand in hand, by the Son of God? Away from the noise and distractions of the city, Jesus could avoid publicity and save the man embarrassment from gawkers.

This healing involved the physical touch of Jesus because to a blind man, touch would be the most comforting, the most intimate of approaches. Jesus applied saliva to His fingers, touched the man's eyes and asked the man an unusual question. "Do you see anything?" He wasn't surprised by his answer because Jesus had *deliberately* performed a partial healing.

The man responded, "People look like trees". The blind man's condition went from total blindness to distorted vision. To complete the restoration of sight, Jesus touched the man's eyes again and the world came into perfect focus.

Of all the recorded miracles of healing during Jesus' ministry, this is the only one in which restoration was not instantaneous. However, everything Jesus did, He did for a purpose. This two-step healing was intentional. As the shadow of the cross loomed closer, Jesus used this healing to teach His disciples about spiritual blindness. *Their* spiritual vision was cloudy about who He is. Yes, they were slowly coming to see and understand that Jesus is the Messiah and their spiritual blindness *would* be healed, but gradually. Only after the cross and Jesus' resurrection would they completely see.

When Jesus walked this earth, His ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing fulfilled prophecies. His miracles were numerous, massive and constant. Yet the religious leaders rejected Him. And when Jesus indicted them, it turned them bitterly against Him.

From this point on in His ministry, Jesus will concentrate on His disciples – teaching and giving them their final refinement for what soon would occur - His death, His resurrection and *their* subsequent ministry. Jesus will continue to speak of grace and salvation but His words to the religious leaders will be judgmental and condemning. Things were building to an inevitable showdown.

In the Gospel of John, it says, "*Jesus came into the very world He created, but the world didn't recognize Him. He came to His own people, and even they rejected Him. But to all who believed Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God.*" (John 1:10-12).

As Dr. David Jeremiah would say, "Can I get an *amen* to that?"

Jesus taught me about God, that:

God's commands must *not* take second place to human traditions and rituals
God desires worship from our heart; not empty words from our lips
God gave us the only perfect Heart Surgeon – His Son Jesus!