

Homiletics Analysis: Matthew 15

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Matthew 15 divides into two major movements joined by a theological hinge. In the first movement (vv. 1–20), Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem confront Jesus over His disciples’ failure to observe the “tradition of the elders” regarding handwashing. Jesus turns the confrontation back on His accusers: their tradition has not supplemented the Law of God — it has *replaced* it. The specific example He deploys is devastating: the Corban practice permitted a man to dedicate resources to God (in name) while leaving his parents without support, thereby using religious tradition to nullify the plain command of the fifth commandment. Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 to diagnose the root condition — hearts far from God, worship rendered in vain, human precepts displacing divine commands. He then calls the crowd and instructs them on defilement: it is not what enters a man from outside that defiles, but what proceeds from within — from the heart. When the disciples report that the Pharisees were offended, Jesus is unimpressed: every plant not planted by His Father will be uprooted. The Pharisees are blind guides leading the blind. In private, Peter asks for explanation; Jesus clarifies with directness: evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander — these come from the heart, and they defile.

In the second movement (vv. 21–39), Jesus withdraws to the region of Tyre and Sidon, where a Canaanite woman — a Gentile, outside the covenant — cries out for mercy for her demon-possessed daughter. The disciples want her dismissed. Jesus initially responds with silence, then with apparent restriction: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The woman worships and presses her case. Jesus responds with a saying that sounds harsh: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” The woman does not recoil — she receives the saying, accepts her place, and argues from within it: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Jesus commends her faith as great and grants her request. This is immediately followed by Jesus returning to the Sea of Galilee, healing large crowds of lame, blind, crippled, mute, and many others — the crowd marveling and glorifying the God of Israel. He then feeds four thousand with seven loaves and a few fish, with seven baskets of fragments remaining.

This Text — Intent:

God is using Matthew 15 to accomplish a specific reorientation in the reader: to strip away every externalized, tradition-managed, performance-oriented substitute for genuine faith, and to show that the thing God values — indeed, the thing that moves Jesus to act with power and compassion — is not religious pedigree, ceremonial compliance, or ethnic

standing, but *faith that comes from the heart*. The chapter confronts the reader's tendency to locate the spiritual problem outside themselves (in others' uncleanness, in one's own ritual compliance, in who is and isn't a proper recipient of God's grace) and insists that the problem is interior and the remedy is trust. The Canaanite woman — the chapter's unlikely hero — models precisely what the Pharisees, the disciples, and the reader are being called toward: a faith that knows its own unworthiness, refuses to be deterred, and throws itself entirely on the mercy of Jesus.

Subject Sentence: True religion is a matter of the heart, not of human tradition or ethnic standing.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every form of externalized, tradition-managed religion and calling the reader to the only thing He values — a heart-faith that throws itself on Jesus' mercy regardless of pedigree, performance, or prior standing.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Corban Practice and Tradition vs. Commandment (vv. 1–9)

The Roman Catholic tradition has historically distinguished between Tradition (capital T, apostolic and authoritative) and mere human traditions, arguing that Jesus' critique targets only the latter — and that therefore a properly constituted church tradition carries binding authority alongside Scripture. This reading is worth acknowledging where it correctly identifies that Jesus is not opposing *all* tradition per se, but specifically tradition that nullifies the Word of God. However, the Reformed reading goes further and is textually stronger: Jesus' argument in vv. 3–6 is not merely that *this particular* tradition happened to be corrupt — His argument is structural. He quotes Isaiah 29:13 to diagnose a chronic human condition: the tendency of religious systems to substitute human precepts for divine commands. The indictment is not “you picked the wrong tradition”; it is “you have made the Word of God void through your tradition” (v. 6). This is a warning about the nature of tradition-authority as such, not merely a critique of one abuse. The Reformed principle of *sola scriptura* — Scripture as the norming norm against which all tradition is normed — is here grounded in Jesus' own teaching. The Roman Catholic reading must be qualified at the structural level: it is the *authority-claim* of tradition over Scripture that Jesus is targeting, not merely bad applications of tradition.

Defilement from Within (vv. 10–20)

Some within the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition, and occasionally popular evangelical preaching, has read vv. 10–20 primarily as liberation from legalistic food rules — a text about freedom from external religious constraints. There is a partial truth here: Jesus is

indeed relocating the locus of defilement from external to internal, and Mark's parallel (Mark 7:19) explicitly notes that Jesus "declared all foods clean." But this reading, if it stops there, misses the passage's primary intent, which is not liberation from dietary scruples but *diagnosis of the human heart*. The list in v. 19 — evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander — is not incidental. Jesus is not primarily saying "relax about external rules." He is saying "the heart is where your real problem lives." The Reformed reading, consistent with total depravity, hears this passage as a stark anthropological statement: the heart left to itself generates moral corruption. The application is not "be free from external constraints" but "recognize that your need is not behavioral adjustment but heart transformation." This alternative reading should be *qualified* — it captures something real about the text's polemic against externalism — but it fails if it becomes the primary register.

The Canaanite Woman (vv. 21–28)

This is the passage's most exegetically contested section. Three issues arise:

First, Jesus' apparent harshness — silence, then apparent refusal, then the "dogs" saying — has generated several readings. Some take the silence as a test of the disciples' compassion (they fail). Others (including some feminist interpreters) have argued that Jesus Himself is corrected or expanded by the woman's reply — that He changes His mind under her argument. This reading should be *refuted*: it imports assumptions about Jesus' knowledge and intent that the text does not support and that contradict Matthew's consistent Christology. The far more textually coherent reading — held broadly across Reformed, Lutheran, and Baptist interpreters — is that Jesus' progression is pedagogical and deliberate: He is drawing out her faith for the benefit of both the disciples and the reader, not discovering a blind spot. His commendation — "O woman, great is your faith!" — is a declaration, not a concession.

Second, the "dogs" saying itself. Some have softened this by noting that the Greek *kynarion* (little dogs, household pets) is less harsh than *kyon* (street dogs). This linguistic observation is worth *acknowledging* as moderating the tone somewhat. But the Reformed reading does not need to over-soften it: the saying is genuinely confrontational, and the woman's greatness lies precisely in that she receives the confrontation without flinching, accepts her place in the argument, and presses her case from within it. This is the anatomy of saving faith — not faith that demands better terms, but faith that takes God at His word even when His word appears to exclude.

Third, Dispensational interpreters have noted correctly that Jesus' initial restriction ("I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," v. 24) reflects the historical priority of Israel in the Messiah's earthly ministry. This is *acknowledged* as textually accurate. The Reformed reading does not flatten this: there is a genuine Israel-first sequence in the messianic mission that Matthew's gospel tracks carefully. But the passage does not stop there — it shows that the blessings of the Kingdom overflow the ethnic boundary precisely through faith, anticipating the Great Commission and the Gentile mission of Acts. The Canaanite woman is a Matthean foretaste of what the gospel will do among the nations.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 29:13** — Quoted directly by Jesus in v. 8–9; God’s own diagnosis through Isaiah that Israel’s worship had become an external performance while hearts remained far from Him. The passage Jesus cites is not incidental — it establishes that the Pharisees’ condition is a recurrence of an ancient, prophesied failure pattern, not an isolated corruption.
- **Deuteronomy 5:16 / Exodus 20:12** — The fifth commandment, invoked explicitly in v. 4. Jesus’ argument depends on the authority of the Decalogue as God’s direct Word; the Corban tradition is measured against it and found to nullify it. The Law of God stands as the standard against which tradition is judged.
- **Jeremiah 17:9** — “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.” The anthropological claim Jesus makes in vv. 18–19 — that defilement proceeds from the heart — finds its Old Testament grounding here. Jesus is not introducing a new doctrine of human nature; He is confirming what the prophets already declared.
- **Romans 3:22–23 / 10:12** — Paul’s statement that “there is no distinction” — between Jew and Gentile — in both condemnation and in the gift of righteousness through faith. The Canaanite woman episode anticipates exactly this Pauline trajectory: the boundary of covenant blessing is not ethnicity but faith, and the gospel is “for everyone who believes.”
- **Hebrews 11:6** — “Without faith it is impossible to please Him.” The Canaanite woman is commended for her *faith*, not her ethnicity, her theological precision, or her ritual standing. This is the canon’s consistent testimony: what pleases God is trust, and it pleases Him wherever He finds it.

Aim: To confront every form of externalized or tradition-managed religion in the reader, diagnose the heart as the true locus of the spiritual problem, and draw the reader toward the Canaanite woman’s model of undeflectable, self-abandoning faith in Jesus.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem challenge Jesus: why do the disciples not wash hands according to the tradition of the elders?	The challengers are from Jerusalem — the center of religious authority. This is an official confrontation, not a casual debate.

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3–6	Jesus countercharges: why do <i>they</i> break the commandment of God for the sake of tradition? Corban example — dedicating resources to God to avoid supporting parents — directly nullifies the fifth commandment.	Jesus’ counterattack is immediate and specific. He names the commandment, names the tradition, and names the nullification. No hedging.
7–9	Jesus calls them hypocrites and quotes Isaiah 29:13: lips honor God, heart is far away; worship in vain; teaching human precepts as doctrines.	The Isaiah quotation is not proof-texting — it is diagnostic. The Pharisees are the living recurrence of an ancient prophesied failure.
10–11	Jesus calls the crowd and states the principle: not what goes in defiles, but what comes out.	Public statement, addressed to all, not just the Pharisees. The principle is universal.
12–14	Disciples report Pharisees were offended. Jesus: they are plants not planted by the Father — they will be uprooted. Leave them; they are blind guides of the blind. Both will fall into the pit.	Jesus is not interested in managing the Pharisees’ offense. His assessment is final: they are not His Father’s planting. The blindness metaphor is severe.
15–20	Peter asks for explanation of the parable. Jesus expresses mild exasperation (“Are you also still without understanding?”) and explains: what enters the mouth passes through the stomach and is expelled. What comes out of the mouth comes from the heart — evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These defile. Eating with unwashed hands does not	The list in v. 19 is anthropologically comprehensive — covering thought, action, relationship, and speech. The heart is the factory of defilement.

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	defile.	
21–22	Jesus withdraws to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman comes out crying: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”	The geographical withdrawal is significant — Jesus is now outside Jewish territory. The woman’s address — “Lord, Son of David” — is full messianic confession from a Gentile.
23	Jesus does not answer. Disciples urge Him to send her away because she is crying out after them.	The disciples’ request is ambiguous — it may mean “send her away satisfied” or “dismiss her.” Either way, they want the situation resolved by removal, not engagement.
24	Jesus responds: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”	This is not a refusal but a statement of mission priority. It does not say the woman cannot receive; it defines the primary scope of the earthly mission.
25–26	The woman comes, kneels, and says: “Lord, help me.” Jesus: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”	The intensification of confrontation. The woman is now face to face with Jesus, and the saying is direct.
27	The woman: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”	The pivot of the entire passage. She does not dispute the saying — she argues from within it. This is the anatomy of great faith.
28	Jesus: “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” Her daughter is healed instantly.	“Great faith” — the same category invoked for the centurion in Matthew 8:10. Faith crosses ethnic lines and moves Jesus to immediate, full action.
29–31	Jesus returns to the Sea of Galilee, goes up on a mountain. Large crowds bring lame, blind, crippled,	“The God of Israel” — this phrase suggests the crowd is at least partially Gentile, marveling at the God of

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	mute, and many others; Jesus heals them all. The crowd marvels and glorifies “the God of Israel.”	Israel’s power displayed through Jesus.
32–38	Jesus has compassion on the crowd of four thousand who have been with Him three days without food. Disciples: where do we get enough bread in this desolate place? Jesus takes seven loaves and a few fish, gives thanks, breaks and gives to the disciples, who distribute. All eat and are satisfied; seven baskets of broken pieces remain.	The feeding of the four thousand echoes the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14) but is not a repetition — it is an expansion. Seven baskets (a number of completeness or abundance) vs. twelve. The compassion language (“I have compassion on the crowd”) explicitly drives the miracle.
39	Jesus dismisses the crowds, gets in the boat, and goes to the region of Magadan.	Scene transition; the chapter closes.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–9	The Confrontation: Tradition Against the Word of God
2	10–20	The Diagnosis: Defilement Comes from the Heart
3	21–28	The Encounter: Faith That Crosses Every Boundary
4	29–39	The Overflow: Compassion, Healing, and Provision Beyond Israel

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: True religion is a matter of the heart, not of human tradition or ethnic standing.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every form of externalized, tradition-managed religion and calling the reader to the only thing He values — a heart-faith that throws itself on Jesus' mercy regardless of pedigree, performance, or prior standing.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine what you are actually trusting for your standing before God. (*Mind/belief*)

The Pharisees were not careless people — they were rigorously religious, and their rigor had become their security. The traditions had become, in practice, a management system for their relationship with God: do these things, and you are acceptable. Jesus does not merely critique their specific traditions; He diagnoses the structure of the problem — the human tendency to locate righteousness in observable, manageable external practice. Every reader carries some version of this: church attendance, theological correctness, moral track record, family Christian heritage, ministry involvement. These are not wrong things — they become lethal when they function as the ground of standing before God rather than responses to grace already given. Matthew 15 calls the reader to honest examination: what are you actually trusting? What would need to fail for you to feel spiritually insecure? That thing is functioning as your Corban tradition.

2. Take seriously that your heart — not your circumstances or other people — is your primary spiritual problem. (*Mind/belief*) Jesus' statement in vv. 18–19 is not primarily about what others have done to you or what external pressures have shaped you — it is about the heart as the factory of moral and spiritual corruption. The list He offers — evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander — is not a description of extreme sinners; it is a description of the unreformed interior of every human being. Contemporary culture locates the spiritual and moral problem primarily in systems, structures, and external influences. Jesus locates it in the heart. This is not license to ignore systemic issues — it is a diagnosis that runs deeper: the systems themselves are expressions of what flows from human hearts. The application is not despair but honesty: stop blaming your circumstances for what your heart is generating, and stop expecting external improvement to resolve an interior problem.

3. Let the Canaanite woman's posture redefine what you call "unanswered prayer." (*Affections/worship*) She faced silence, apparent restriction, and a saying that sounded like rejection — and she continued to cry out, continued to worship, and continued to press her case. She did not interpret Jesus' silence as absence, His apparent restriction as indifference, or the "dogs" saying as a final word. She knew enough about who He was to know that even the crumbs of His mercy exceeded anything she could get anywhere else. Most contemporary believers quietly abandon persistent prayer long before the Canaanite woman's first response, having interpreted the first silence as a "no." Her faith was not that she believed Jesus would answer her in the way she expected on the timeline she wanted — her faith was that He was the only one worth asking, that there was nowhere else to go, and that even partial access to His mercy was sufficient. That posture — not the

formula of persistent prayer, but the orientation that drives it — is what Jesus called great faith. Examine your prayer life not for its technique but for its orientation: are you praying like someone who has nowhere else to go?

4. Repent of the ways you have decided in advance who does and doesn't belong at the table of Jesus' mercy. (*Affections/worship*) The disciples' response to the Canaanite woman — “send her away” — is the natural response of people who have organized their understanding of God's blessing around visible categories of belonging. She was the wrong ethnicity, the wrong gender, the wrong religious background, and she was making a scene. The disciples' reflex was exclusion, and it is not hard to find its contemporary equivalents: the person whose sin is too visible, whose background is too messy, whose theology is too undeveloped, whose desperation is too inconvenient. Jesus did not send her away. He drew out her faith and commended it as great. The application is not a vague instruction to be “more welcoming” — it is a confrontation with the specific categories by which we have decided who is a likely candidate for Jesus' mercy, and a call to repent of those decisions. The people we are most tempted to dismiss may be the ones whose faith, when drawn out, Jesus would call great.

5. When you come to Jesus in need, come as the Canaanite woman came — not negotiating, not demanding better terms, but casting yourself on whatever mercy He gives. (*Will/behavior*) She did not argue that she deserved the children's bread. She did not demand that Jesus reconsider His priorities. She received the hardest word He gave her and found within it the very foothold she needed: “Yes, Lord — but even the dogs eat the crumbs.” This is the behavioral shape of saving faith in its most distilled form: you agree with everything God says about your standing, you make no claim on His grace as something owed, and you throw yourself entirely on whatever mercy He chooses to extend — which will always be more than you need. Apply this now: whatever you are bringing to Jesus — a need, a sin, a failing, a person you love who is far from God — come without negotiation. Do not bring Jesus a deal. Bring Him your need, your unworthiness, and your conviction that He is worth asking anyway. That is the posture He called great faith, and it is the posture He rewarded with immediate and complete action.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Matthew 15 makes a foundational theological claim about the nature of religion, the condition of the human heart, and the character of divine grace. First, Jesus establishes that the authority of God's revealed Word stands above all human tradition — tradition is not a supplement to Scripture but is always accountable to it, and when tradition claims authority that displaces Scripture's commands, it has become an instrument of disobedience regardless of its pious intention. Second, Jesus articulates a doctrine of the heart that is consistent with the biblical testimony from Jeremiah through Paul: the heart is the source of human corruption, not a neutral instrument shaped entirely by external forces. The problem is interior, which means external management — religious,

moral, or cultural — cannot solve it. Third, the Canaanite woman episode displays the character of divine grace: it is not bounded by ethnic pedigree, religious standing, or prior covenant membership. What God values is faith — trust that knows its own unworthiness and throws itself on mercy — and wherever He finds it, He responds with full and immediate power.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter is a sustained biblical warrant for the Reformation's core convictions about Scripture, the human condition, and saving faith. The polemic against tradition-over-Scripture in vv. 1–9 is Jesus' own teaching that underlies *sola scriptura* — not as a later Protestant invention but as a principle Jesus Himself deployed against the religious establishment of His day. The anthropology of vv. 10–20 — the heart as the generator of defilement — grounds the Reformed doctrine of total depravity not as a pessimistic theory but as a diagnostic reality that Jesus requires His disciples to accept. The Canaanite woman's faith exhibits precisely what the Reformers meant by *sola fide*: not faith as a human achievement or a religious virtue, but faith as the empty hand that receives mercy it cannot earn and does not deserve. The chapter's trajectory — from religious insiders whose hearts are far from God, to a Gentile outsider whose faith Jesus calls great — is a compressed account of the gospel's logic: justification is by faith alone, received by any who come to Jesus in need and refuse to be turned away. The feeding of the four thousand that closes the chapter shows that the compassion of Jesus — moving through faith, not through pedigree — is not a scarce resource; it overflows, and seven baskets remain.

Main Takeaway

Your standing before God is not secured by your religious track record, your tradition, or your place in the right community — and it cannot be threatened by your uncleanness, your wrong ethnicity, or your disqualifying past. The only thing that moves Jesus to act with full and immediate power is faith — a faith that knows it has no case to make, nowhere else to go, and that even the crumbs of His mercy are more than enough. Come like the Canaanite woman: with nothing to offer, nowhere to turn, and the unshakeable conviction that He is worth asking anyway.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the passage to an argument against religious legalism in general, without confronting the reader's own Corban traditions.** The most common homiletical failure with vv. 1–9 is making the Pharisees the villain in a way that

exempts the congregation. The preacher names “the Pharisees’ problem” as a historical curiosity rather than diagnosing the Corban structure in contemporary form: the giving that substitutes for relational faithfulness, the theological precision that replaces actual obedience, the ministry activity that stands in for personal holiness. Every congregation has Corban traditions. Name them.

- **Stopping vv. 10–20 at “food doesn’t defile” and failing to preach the anthropological claim.** The liberation-from-dietary-rules reading is not wrong, but it is partial and functionally weak. The weight of the passage is on v. 19’s list — the heart as the factory of every form of moral and relational destruction. Preachers who stop at “Jesus freed us from food rules” have preached the footnote and missed the main text. The anthropological claim — the heart is your real problem — is the load-bearing content, and it requires direct confrontation.
- **Softening the Canaanite woman episode to avoid its difficulty.** The progressive hardness of Jesus’ responses — silence, restriction, the “dogs” saying — is not a problem to be explained away. It is the mechanism by which her faith is drawn out and displayed. Preachers who rush past the difficulty to the commendation have cut the nerve of the passage. The greatness of her faith is only visible against the background of what she had to press through. Let the text be hard; let the reader feel what she faced; and then let Jesus’ commendation land with its full force.
- **Using the Canaanite woman’s persistence as a formula for “how to pray” rather than as a display of faith’s anatomy.** The temptation is to reduce the episode to a technique — “pray persistently and Jesus will answer.” This misses the passage’s primary claim. The woman’s persistence is not the point; it is the expression of something deeper: her conviction that Jesus was her only option and that even partial access to His mercy was worth everything. Preachers who draw “five steps to persistent prayer” from this passage have domesticated what should be a confrontation with the nature of saving faith.
- **Treating the chapter’s two movements (vv. 1–20 and vv. 21–39) as independent units with separate sermons without seeing their theological unity.** The chapter has a governing logic: what disqualifies, what qualifies, and what the thing that qualifies (faith) actually produces. The Pharisees have the right tradition but hearts far from God — they are disqualified. The Canaanite woman has no tradition, no standing, no rights — but she has faith, and it qualifies her completely. This contrast is the chapter’s governing argument. Preaching the two halves independently loses the logic entirely.
- **Failing to make Jesus the hero of the Canaanite woman episode.** There is a version of this sermon where the woman is the hero — “be like her, press through, don’t give up.” This is the Clowney anti-moralism warning in direct application. She is a model of faith, but she is not the object of faith. The passage is ultimately about what Jesus does with faith when He finds it — He responds with immediate, full,

compassionate power. The Main Takeaway is not “be like her.” It is “He is worth coming to exactly like her.”