Chapter 15 – Answer Guide

1. In verses 1-9, what is the issue concerning the “tradition of the elders?” Why is Jesus so confrontational here?
   1. According to the tradition of the elders, a faithful Israelite had to wash his hands before eating, and Jesus’ disciples were not doing that. In Exodus 30:17, it mentions the need for Aaron and the priests to wash their hands and feet in before entering the tabernacle of testimony. However, in the law, there is not requirement for washing hands before eating. This came about through Hebrew teaching on law much later. This was part of a great set of teachings called the oral teachings of the Hebrews that are essential in Rabbinic Judaism. However, Jesus is not always pleased with such interpretations of the faith. Instead, Jesus finds hypocrisy and cold-heartedness in the application of many of these teachings.
   2. Jesus become confrontational here because of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes. They teach but they do not follow their own teachings. Or, they teach what the Lord does not want to be taught. In this case, Jesus refers to oral tradition that abrogates the commandment to “Honor thy father and mother.” This commandment cannot be abrogated. So why are the Pharisees and scribes following one rule, but not another more important one? This is the hypocrisy Jesus keeps pointing out. This type of teaching does not lead to salvation. Instead, it leads to hardening of hearts (see Mark 3:5)
2. Why does Jesus quote Isaiah in verses 8-9?
   1. The Evangelists often note when Jesus quotes from the Scriptures (the Old Testament), especially in the Gospel according to St. Matthew. In this case, Jesus is pointing out that the hearts of the Pharisees and scribes are far from God as Isaiah prophesied. Not only does Jesus use the Scriptures to point out the places where He is prophesied, but from time to time He will point out the places where the actions of others are prophesied. Using the Scriptures in this way will resonate with the Hebrew audience.
3. What is the main point of whole scenario (verses 1-12)? (Hint: look at verses 10 and 11, and don’t underestimate verse 10!)
   1. The point is to “hear and understand” Jesus and what He teaches. What makes a person holy is the person’s state of being; the way the person thinks, speaks, and acts according to the will of God. Holiness is not achieved by a strict adherence to the law. Therefore, what defiles a man is not what enters his mouth, but what comes out of it (verse 11 paraphrased).
4. What is Jesus’ response to the disciples when they tell Him that He offended the Pharisees? Shouldn’t Jesus try to go after them?
   1. Jesus says they are “blind leading the blind” and to “let them be.” Jesus offers the correct way of thinking, speaking and acting. Jesus offers the correct way of interpreting the Scriptures. The Pharisees are not willing to listen and Jesus doesn’t want people to waste their time with them.
   2. Jesus doesn’t have to go after them because, indeed, He has come for everyone. They reject Jesus. It’s their choice to reject Him and there is no need to try and make that coal into a diamond.
5. What is the essential understanding of verses 15-20?
   1. See 3.a.
6. Why did St. Peter have a hard time understanding this as seen in verse 15? Remember, try to put yourselves in St. Peter’s shoes, or sandals, and don’t think as we do today with our knowledge of the New Testament.
   1. Remember, the statement was in the form of a parable. Parables are meant to push people deeper into their spirituality – deeper into their relationship with God. If in his lifetime St. Peter only understood the teaching of the Pharisees as they offered, it would be difficult to “unlearn” what he had been taught. Jesus is pushing him to think more deeply and clearly about what He really wants people to understand about a proper relationship with the Lord and what the means in terms of its expression in everyday life.
7. Who is a Canaanite? Why are Canaanites looked down upon?
   1. Canaanites are the descendants of Canaan, or Ham. He was one of Noah’s sons. He committed a grave sin again his father, Noah. Noah cursed Canaan and prophesied that Canaan and his descendants would always be subject to the other two brothers. Canaanites lived in the land when Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan after the 40 years in the wilderness. They are seen at best as heathens (they worshipped Baal) and at worst constant enemies who would pull people away from God. This is why they were looked down upon by the Israelites.
8. Why do the disciples want her to go away?
   1. They may have been tired from a long day. They may have been annoyed at her insistence upon reaching Jesus, especially since they could tell (by accent, language, clothing and especially location) that she was a Canaanite. They may have figured that Canaanites don’t believe as the Israelites, so why waste time with her. She was a pest to them!
9. Why does Jesus pretend not to listen to her?
   1. This was a test. A test perhaps for the woman, but certainly for the disciples. Jesus already knows her heart. This will be a beautiful example of Gentile faith for the disciples.
10. Why does Jesus seem to be mean when He says, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” How does the Canaanite woman understand this?
    1. Jesus is saying that what God offers is essential for life (remember John 6 as a good point of similarity between the two Gospel accounts). Therefore, what God offers must not be treated disrespectfully or commonly.
    2. The woman knows that that others will think of her as a “dog” because she is not an Israelite. However, she shows great humility, along with incredible strength and determination, and makes the beautiful statement that even the dogs eat the essential crumbs that fall from the people of the house. Though she likens herself to a dog, she knows that the dog is still around the table!
    3. An interesting note I read: there are two words for dog in Greek that are used in the New Testament - kuwn and kunarion. Though the latter is probably a derivative of the former, the former is ALWAYS used with a negative connotation (as in a pack of wild dogs – or people far from God that no longer seem human or humane). The former is used in Matt 7:6 and clearly, when put up next to pigs, it is used in a negative sense. Kunarion has a much more gentle interpretation – as in a puppy or a dog that is a part of a household. Therefore, when Jesus uses kunarion, the implication is not nearly as bad as at first blush. Instead, it actually shows as sense of fondness.
11. How is the Canaanite woman’s faith revealed?
    1. She calls Jesus the “Son of David,” which implies she views Jesus as the anointed One of Israel! (verse 22)
    2. She worships Him! (verse 25)
    3. She is persistent knowing that Jesus is hearing her and will answer. (verses 23 and 25)
    4. She speaks to her own humility, yet her zeal for the Lord’s presence in her life and the life of her daughter is astounding. (verse 27)
    5. Jesus declares it! (verse 28)
12. Does Jesus really think she is a dog? Why not?
    1. Absolutely not. If He did, He wouldn’t have helped her. This was a test for her, but especially for the disciples (see 9a)
13. What does this story tell us about Jesus’ purpose of salvation?
    1. The purpose of salvation is for all people in the world. Salvation is not just for the Israelite, nor is it just for the Greek. It is for all people. Jesus uses an enemy and never-do-well in the eyes of the Israelites to make this point.
14. Where does Jesus go after this encounter with the Canaanite woman?
    1. Jesus went back from the area of Tyre and Sidon (areas in modern day southern Lebanon and northern Israel) to the Sea of Galilee. In particular, we went among the Gentiles in this area. This follows well from the encounter with the Canaanite woman.
15. What do verses 32-39 remind us of – that just happened in chapter 14?
    1. It reminds us of the feeding of the 5,000.
16. What is different about the people in this story?
    1. The difference is that the people in chapter 15 are mostly Gentiles while in chapter 14 they are mostly Israelites.
17. What sacrament can be connected to these two stories of feeding multitudes? Why?
    1. We can connect it to Holy Communion because i) the manner of the prayer, thanksgiving, breaking, and distribution we read about in verse 35 is very similar to what happens during the preparation of Holy Communion during the liturgy ii) the are receiving essential food iii) Jesus creates something out of what didn’t exist before (see the note in the Orthodox Study Bible on Matt 15:32-39)