

“Love Everyone Always”

Matthew 15:1-3, 7-12, 14, 21-31, 22:37-40, Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18

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Prayer for Understanding Holy Spirit thank you for giving us life. Enlighten us and set our hearts ablaze so every moment of our lives can be illumined with your amazing grace, steadfast love and abundant life. Amen.

God commands us to love and serve everyone always. There is never an exception. No one is ever to be excluded. The good news of Matthew proclaims: **Matthew 15:1-3, 7-12, 14 NLT “Some Pharisees and teachers of religious law now arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. They asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples disobey our age-old tradition? For they ignore our tradition of ceremonial hand washing before they eat.” Jesus replied, “And why do you, by your traditions, violate the direct commandments of God? You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when Isaiah prophesied about you, for Isaiah wrote, ‘These people honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from God. Their worship is a farce, for they teach human-made ideas as commands from God.’” Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. “Listen,” Jesus said, “and try to understand. It is not what goes into your mouth that defiles you; you are defiled by the words that come out of your mouth.” Then the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?” Jesus replied, so ignore them. They are blind guides leading the blind, and if one blind person guides another, they will both fall into a ditch.”**

Religious leaders made a special trip from Jerusalem to confront Jesus about hygiene issues related to their traditions and ways of doing things. They are from Jerusalem, so this is serious. It is like if you got a visit from the “feds”. These are the heavy-handed enforcers of the law. One should not disagree with them or one will be punished, imprisoned, roughed up, denied their rights and be publicly crucified. These trigger-happy enforcers confront Jesus regarding ceremonial handwashing. They ask questions and demand answers. Jesus replies with questions, a prophetic declaration of their failure to love and a real-world case study which we will get to in our scripture in a few minutes.

These religious leaders drew a small circle with only a few people in and most people out. Their focus was on winning every court case to force their narrow-minded, hypocritical, unloving ways on others. They do not care who got hurt as long as their religion, politic party, way of life, power, traditions and status remained in control of everyone. There is a monumental chasm between their desire for humanity and God’s desire. God desires that everyone loves and serves everyone, that all people live in harmony, that we are one inclusive family, that we affirm each other and build each other up, that we care for the cosmos. These religious leaders believe the only way forward is to elevate themselves, for them to be in control, for them to force their small, limited traditions on everyone, to hell with love, to hell with certain people. They demanded purity. These religious leaders had distorted worship. They thought they were worshipping God, in reality they were worshipping human religion, politics, and their policies.

Jesus confronted these religious leaders: **“And why do you, by your traditions, violate the direct commandments of God?”** The direct command of God is stated in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. **Deuteronomy 6:5 NLT “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.” Leviticus 19:18 NLT “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22:37-40 NLT “Jesus replied, ““You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”** Jesus went on to explain that everyone is our neighbor, even a despised, enemy, outsider, in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Throughout scripture, gracious hospitality of everyone is commanded. The poor, refugees, immigrants, women, children, and foreigners are specifically listed as people all must love and graciously welcome.

Jesus confronts everyone with these prophetic words: **“And why do you, by your traditions, violate the direct commandments of God? You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when Isaiah prophesied about you, for Isaiah wrote, ‘These people honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from God. Their worship is a farce, for they teach human-made ideas as commands from God.’”** Prophetic words convict us of the ways we fail to love. If you are unaware of an uncomfortable challenge in these prophetic words, then

spend time searching your heart, examining your words, and evaluating your actions, because everyone fails to love in all situations. Identify who, and how, you are failing to love. Strive to love everyone, always, no exemptions.

There is individual sin and corporate sin. If Christianity or if the United States of America fails to love a person or group of people, a country, a religion, undocumented immigrants, certain orientations, unique identities, then we are failing to love, sinning. For each of us is responsible for the actions and inactions of every group, organization, country, religion and community to which we belong. The circle we draw must be big enough to include everyone with never an exception. Any exclusion is merely a human-made idea that is in directly opposition to God's command to love everyone, always.

All of this is clarified with a real-world situation. Without context, the following scripture is easily distorted. Jesus mirrors the failure to love, inaction, destructive demonizing words and tormenting actions of some religious leaders in the hope of enabling them to see that their religion is a human-made house of cards on shifting sand, instead of God's bedrock of love with each person being a living stone cemented together with love. I have been convicted of unloving habits that I have when I have seen similar behavior in my children. For me seeing another do something unloving that I also do, drives home urgency for me to repent. It is critical that you keep this in mind when listening to this scripture. Jesus is modeling the inaction and demonizing words of these religious leaders to shock everyone to repentance. The good news of Matthew: **Matthew 15:21-28 NLT** **"Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman who lived there came to Jesus, pleading, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! For my daughter is possessed by a demon that torments her severely.' But Jesus gave her no reply, not even a word. Then Jesus' disciples urged Jesus to send her away. 'Tell her to go away,' they said. 'She is bothering us with all her begging.' Then Jesus said to the woman, 'I was sent only to help God's lost sheep—the people of Israel.' But she came and worshiped God, pleading again, 'Lord, help me!' Jesus responded, 'It is not right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.' She replied, 'That is true, Lord, but even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters' table.' 'Dear woman,' Jesus said to her, 'your faith is great. Your request is granted.' And her daughter was instantly healed."**

The initial unloving sins are ignoring, denial, indifference, apathy, not listening, and failing to act. Love demands we educate ourselves in the ways people are being mistreated, denied dignity, denied equal rights, denied justice, and excluded from a fair share of resources. Love demands that we befriend the oppressed and listen to them. Love demands that we take action to help the oppressed bringing everyone into loving community.

If we are not an ally for outsiders and advocating for anyone who is being denied their infinite value as a beloved child of God, then others will assume we support divisive human-made ways. Even well-meaning people who are striving to be disciples will then urge us to send certain people away making distorted justifications for their lack of love.

This scripture demands that we cross every border with love. There are many vital details in our scripture. Jesus travels to the border towns of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman lived there. Gasp! Matthew identifies this person as a "Canaanite" woman, emphasizing her heritage as among the earliest inhabitants of modern-day Lebanon. "Canaanite" meant a long-hardened pagan and a longtime enemy of Jewish monotheistic faith, a person with a different religion. The Canaanite woman lived there, on the wrong side of the border, an undocumented, illegal, immigrant. Furthermore, the strict behavioral codes of decency in Near Eastern culture sternly frowned on women and men socializing. The brazen approach of this lone woman to Jesus would have the unloving religious leaders labeling her a person of despicable character. She is an unescorted woman with a daughter. No husband. No males in her household. We have an undocumented, illegal immigrant, from a different religion, a woman, a perceived enemy of the state, demanding her rights and demanding she has a vote.

In those days children held the lowest status, often viewed as an economic burden and expendable commodity. How dare this Canaanite woman love her daughter and advocate for her. She laments my **"daughter is possessed by a demon that torments her severely."** The demon is unloving people who judge, exclude, devalue, oppress, and abuse her. The demon is unloving people who torment her, seek to deport her, take from her and deny her opportunities.

Jesus says words that are not God's words, not Jesus' words, rather the words of some of the religious leaders to shock everyone into seeing how unloving, harsh, destructive, evil and demonizing they are. **"Jesus said to the woman, 'I was sent only to help God's lost sheep—the people of Israel. It is not right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.'"** These are awful words. You are lower than the lowest of the low. You are not even human. You are a dog. The woman replies, **"even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters' table."** She convincingly points out that most of these unloving people are more loving of their dog than they are of certain people, they provide more of the necessities of life to a pet than to certain people.

Jesus' compassion for this woman will not allow him to impersonate unloving people a moment longer. Jesus puts down the mirror, returns to his fully God nature and lovingly, instantly heals the Canaanite woman and her daughter. The healing is full inclusion into community. The healing stopped fear, hate, and dehumanization. The healing was that they were graciously welcomed into loving community, given equal rights, a voice, and a vote.

Homiletics declares: "Jesus shows what it means to live as someone in touch with God's law that is higher than the laws, traditions and conventions of human society. No self-respecting and self-righteous person but Jesus would have had anything to do with this woman, but Jesus does. And that is what we do with a new perspective, we are open for opportunities to reconcile, be gracious, generous, kind, compassionate and to lovingly serve everyone."

Some religious leaders were not convicted by their failure to love, instead they doubled down on their hypocrisy preaching sermons that exclude people, creating laws that oppress, legislating policies that deny rights, forming a political party that makes human declarations claiming they are from God when in reality they are in direct opposition to God's command to love everyone. Some religious leaders spread fear and hate. They dehumanized. They recruited an angry mob to crucify love, to crucify Jesus.

The good news of Matthew: **Matthew 15:28-31 NLT "Jesus returned to the Sea of Galilee and climbed a hill and sat down. A vast crowd brought to Jesus people who were lame, blind, crippled, those who could not speak and many others. They laid them before Jesus, and Jesus healed them all. The crowd was amazed! Those who had not been able to speak were talking, the crippled were made well, the lame were walking, and the blind could see again! And they praised the God of Israel."**

The supreme good news: **"Jesus healed them all."** Even the unloving religious leaders will be healed. You and I will be healed. God will enable us to love all people, love always and love in every situation. Amen

