

## Defining Acceptability

The Jews were very concerned with ritual purity, ancestry, and questions of belonging and participating in the traditions associated with the Law. Most of the concerns of ritual purity surrounded the issue of being acceptable to God and not offending God's holiness.

There were laws regarding what we might consider nothing more than manners and customs, but which served to deal with distancing themselves from sin and the inadvertent breaking of God's instructions to the chosen people. There was nothing wrong with most of this, but it often became abusive when law, procedure, custom, and practice took precedence over giving value to God's priorities of justice, mercy, love, and care for those without power and privilege.

Jesus seemed to the disciples to throw the baby out with the bath water at times, so they challenged him and he challenged back for them to review their priorities. He reminded them that God was not so interested in the external aspects of law, but in the motivation of the heart.

Then he took it a step further. He led them outside the safe confines of Israel into enemy territory. There they were confronted with a woman who was ritually impure. From the traditional Jewish perspective, she was worthless. Jesus answered her pleas from that traditional standpoint, but then he ignored the tradition to deal with her in grace. It was an opportunity for the disciples to make a new judgment based on grace and not tradition.

She was already acceptable to God because of her faith and God's willingness to offer grace. It was not law or tradition that made her acceptable. It was the love of God, even for one who religious tradition shoved aside as worthless chattel. The rules about keeping internal purity suddenly fell away in the face of grace. Are we ready to use these new paradigms to determine acceptability? It may be, after all, that what is really worthless is much of our definitions.

—Christopher B. Harbin

## Matthew 15:15-28

<sup>15</sup>Peter replied, "What did you mean when you talked about the things that make people unclean?"

<sup>16</sup>Jesus then said:

*Don't any of you know what I am talking about by now? <sup>17</sup>Don't you know that the food you put into your mouth goes into your stomach and then out of your body? <sup>18</sup>But the words that come out of your mouth come from your heart. And they are what make you unfit to worship God. <sup>19</sup>Out of your heart come evil thoughts, murder, unfaithfulness in marriage, vulgar deeds, stealing, telling lies, and insulting others. <sup>20</sup>These are what make you unclean. Eating without washing your hands will not make you unfit to worship God.*

<sup>21</sup>Jesus left and went to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>Suddenly a Canaanite woman from there came out shouting, "Lord and Son of David, have pity on me! My daughter is full of demons." <sup>23</sup>Jesus did not say a word. But the woman kept following along and shouting, so his disciples came up and asked him to send her away.

<sup>24</sup>Jesus said, "I was sent only to the people of Israel! They are like a flock of lost sheep."

<sup>25</sup>The woman came closer. Then she knelt down and begged, "Please help me, Lord!"

<sup>26</sup>Jesus replied, "It isn't right to take food away from children and feed it to dogs."

<sup>27</sup>"Lord, that's true," the woman said, "but even dogs get the crumbs that fall from their owner's table."

<sup>28</sup>Jesus answered, "Dear woman, you really do have a lot of faith, and you will be given what you want." At that moment her daughter was healed. (TLA)