

## Matthew 15:21-28

### Introduction

There are *two* important lessons that Jesus wants His disciples—and *us*—to learn from this encounter with the Canaanite woman. I believe that one of these lessons is actually related to the healing of the crowds and the feeding of the 4000 which we will be coming to next week in verses 29-39. So this week, we're actually laying the *foundation* for next week – *so much so* that next week, we're going to have to come back again to this story of the Canaanite woman and remind ourselves of much that we are about to see right now. So if you pay close attention, you'll be that much ahead for next week.

Over the last two weeks we have seen Jesus in conflict with the scribes and Pharisees. These Jewish teachers obviously don't believe in Jesus because all they want to do is accuse Jesus of wrongdoing. And Jesus is obviously not impressed with the Jewish teachers because He calls them "hypocrites" (v. 7), illegitimate plants that will be rooted up (v. 13), and blind guides of the blind who are destined to fall into a pit (v. 14). There can be no doubt about where everyone stands. The line in the sand has been clearly drawn. And so it's in light of the Pharisees' rejection of Jesus that that we read in verse 21:

**I. Matthew 15:21** – And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

Tyre and Sidon are two major cities on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Tyre is about 25 miles north of Galilee and Sidon is another 25 miles north of Tyre. The main point here is that the region of Tyre and Sidon is clearly *Gentile* territory. Even though Jesus won't be staying for very long, this is still a pretty big move. Jesus went away from [Galilee (and the teachers from Jerusalem)] and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Already, we should be able to feel that something very important is about to happen.

**II. Matthew 15:22** – And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon."

Now unless we have really read the Old Testament, there is just no way for us to even begin to understand the significance of what is happening here. Matthew says: "and *behold*"! "Look! I am about to show you something that will shock you, and cause you to be utterly amazed.

Mark says that this woman who came out to Jesus was a "Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth" (7:26), but Matthew, writing for a Jewish audience, pulls out all the stops and calls her a "*Canaanite*". This is the only time in all of the New Testament that this term is ever used. A *Canaanite*! One commentator says that this term was probably "a part of traditional biblical vocabulary for the most persistent and insidious of Israel's enemies in the OT period, those whom God had driven out before his people Israel, and whose idolatrous religion was a constant threat to the religious purity of the people of Yahweh" (France; cf. Deut. 20:16-18; Ezra 9:1). In other words, "Canaanite" was a term that summed up all that was opposed to God, and therefore

detestable in His sight. In the Old Testament, “Canaanite” became a synonym for “trader” or “merchant”, and usually referred to the practice of cheating with false balances – a practice which was an “abomination to the Lord (Prov. 11:1; 20:10, 23).

- ✓ Hosea 12:7 – A merchant [Canaanite], in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress.
- ✓ Zephaniah 1:11 – Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar! For all the traders [Canaanites] are no more; all who weigh out silver are cut off.
- ✓ Zechariah 14:21 (Mat. 21:12-13) – And there shall no longer be a trader [Canaanite] in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.

It’s in light of this Old Testament background that Matthew purposely chooses to use the word “Canaanite”.

“And behold, a *Canaanite* woman from that region came out and was crying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.’” Here is the first shock. The *Canaanite* cries out to Jesus: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David”. It might not have been quite as shocking to hear that a “Gentile” used these words, but to put these words in the mouth of a “*Canaanite*” is truly a mind bender! And what makes this feel even more strange is the obvious contrast with the Jewish teachers from Jerusalem! After the hostile unbelief of the *Jewish* teachers, here is a *Canaanite* woman who acknowledges Jesus as “*Lord*” and “*Son of David*”! “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”

**III. Matthew 15:23a** – But he did not answer her a word.

Jesus heard the woman crying out, but He wouldn’t answer her – not even with a single word! Well after all, she is a Canaanite. The silence of Jesus could very easily be interpreted as rejection. It’s certainly not at all encouraging!

**IV. Matthew 15:23b-24** – And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

When the disciples begged Jesus to send the woman away, they were probably asking Him to just give her what she wanted so that she would go away (cf. Jesus’ answer). The disciples were annoyed with the woman’s constant noise and “crying out”, *which was being caused by the fact that Jesus Himself just went on ignoring her!* So we can’t entirely blame the disciples. If Jesus doesn’t plan on healing the woman, why doesn’t He say something? As far as the disciples are concerned, it makes the most sense at this point just to give her what she wants! So why didn’t Jesus answer the woman even a word? Why didn’t He say *something* – one way or the other? I believe He was just waiting for the opportunity to say what He says next.

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Now we have to be careful here. Jesus doesn’t actually say what He *means* by this. It is absolutely true that Jesus was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus spent His life and ministry in Israel, not in Phoenicia, or Syria, or Egypt, or any other Gentile area. Jesus was sent only to *Israel* to

announce the fulfillment of the promises made to *their* fathers – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But does this mean that Jesus cannot heal the daughter of a Gentile woman? Already, Jesus has healed the servant of a Gentile centurion (8:5-13), and there have probably been *other* Gentiles who have already been healed (4:23-25; 8:28-34). So I think we can assume that Jesus is *testing* the disciples. “You want me to heal this Canaanite woman’s daughter so that she will go away. But I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. So what do you say to that?” Well, what would *we* have said?

**V. Matthew 15:25** – But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”

Once again, we can’t help but be impressed by this *Canaanite* woman. Did she hear what Jesus just said to His disciples? I think she did (notice that Matthew says: “*But* she came and knelt before him...”.) This implies to me that even though she heard what Jesus said about His exclusive mission to Israel... yet she came *anyway*. *Why* would she do this? Is she a glutton for punishment? Or perhaps she’s just that desperate? What makes her think that the one who has so far only *ignored* her and reminded His annoyed disciples that He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel... what is it that *makes her think that **this one** will heal her daughter?* And yet this Canaanite woman refuses to give up. “She came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”

**VI. Matthew 15:26** – And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Now the first thing I want to say here is that we must not read into Jesus’ words a sarcastic, or “mean”, or impatient tone of voice! We must not assume that these words are accompanied by a disgusted frown on Jesus’ face! But neither should we assume that Jesus is smiling at the woman the whole time and somehow hinting to her that He has every intention of giving her what she wants. After all, Jesus did ignore her at the beginning, choosing not to answer her even a single word. I think we can assume that Jesus is very courteously, but also very seriously making His point.

Now in Jesus’ analogy, the “children” are, of course, the Jews. And the “dogs” are obviously the Gentiles – including this Canaanite woman. Some people try to say that since the Greek uses the diminutive form (“little dogs”), therefore this isn’t quite as “hard” as it seems. But Jesus is definitely not referring here to puppies or cute and beloved pets in the way that we would think today. The Jews would sometimes refer to the Gentiles as “dogs” because both dogs and Gentiles were “unclean”. A little dog is *still* a dog, and a person could take “little dog” to be even more insulting than just plain old “dog”!

So if the “children” are the Jews and the “dogs” are the Gentiles, then what is the “bread”? Well, the bread represents the *healing* that this Canaanite woman is requesting for her daughter. But remember that Jesus’ healings always pointed to something more! They pointed to the presence of the kingdom and to *all* of its blessings! So the issue here is not just a healing! What is at issue here is the children’s *bread* – the *blessings* of the Jewish Messiah’s *kingdom rule and reign*. If Jesus were to give this Canaanite woman the healing that she wants, what would that say about

her right to participate in all the rest of the kingdom blessings – such as forgiveness and salvation from sin?

“It is not right”, Jesus says, “to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” And once again, what Jesus says is certainly true. Who can argue with this? So does this *mean* that Jesus must not give the blessings of the kingdom to this Canaanite woman? Well, what would *you* say at this point? First of all, Jesus ignores the woman, answering her not a word. Then Jesus tells His disciples (perhaps in the hearing of the woman) that He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And now this! This last answer truly does seem to be final. How many of us would have *already* gone home? And how many of us would definitely be going home *now*? *And yet...* we do know that Jesus has already healed the servant of a Gentile centurion (8:5-13), and there have probably also been other Gentiles who have already been healed (4:23-25; 8:28-34). The Canaanite woman may not know this... but *we* do. And so once again, it would seem that Jesus is *testing* this Canaanite, and that He means for His disciples (*and for us*) to be watching very closely. But watching what? After all, what could this woman possibly say? What would *you* say, assuming you had not already gone home? Think about it for a minute! What would you have said?

**VII. Matthew 15:27** – She said, “Yes, Lord, for\* even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” (\*“for” is the *correct* translation)

*What* just happened here? First of all, this Canaanite woman *never protests* at being likened to a dog. But how many of *us*, when *we* read this story, are all up in arms? This Canaanite woman does not argue that even though she is a Gentile she still has a right to the same kingdom blessings as the Jews. Instead, what does she do? She actually **embraces**(!) the analogy of the children and the dogs, and *uses* this *very* analogy to ask Jesus *yet again* for His healing! Jesus says to the woman, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” And the woman responds: “Yes, Lord, for even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” At first, it looks like the woman is agreeing with Jesus – that she is ready to surrender and go home (“Yes, Lord”). But then we realize that she is agreeing with Jesus not as an act of surrender, but rather because she has somehow seen in Jesus’ words a reason for *hope* – a reason to keep on asking! “Yes, Lord, **for** even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” And so very carefully, and very respectfully, the woman “turns the tables” back on Jesus! But she has *by no means* “won” the argument. When you are the “dog”, there is no winning the argument. She has not backed Jesus into any corners. There are plenty of answers that Jesus could have logically given and *still* denied this woman’s request. But the fact is that this Canaanite woman has very humbly, and yet very boldly *countered* Jesus – by using Jesus’ own words. Why does she do this? It can’t be because she thinks that Jesus is *against* her (cf. Bruner). If that were really the case, then her response would get her nowhere. If she believed that Jesus were truly against her, then she would have been better off to start begging and pleading – and perhaps even trying to flatter and bribe. So what is it that **emboldens** this woman to very “respectfully” turn the tables back on Jesus? She does this not because she thinks Jesus is against her, but rather because she is confident that in the end, and in spite of His initial silence, and in spite of His words to the disciples, and in spite of His answer to her... she is *confident* that *in the end* He will prove to be her “friend”. In the end, He will prove to be gracious, and favorable, and good.

VIII. **Matthew 15:28** – Then Jesus answered her...

The Greek of this passage reads like this\*:

“A Canaanite woman... came out and was crying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord...’”

**“But He answered her not a word.”**

“His disciples came and begged Him, saying, ‘Send her away...’”

**“But He answered and said...”**

“But she came and knelt before Him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’”

**“But He answered and said...”**

“But she said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’”

**“THEN [at last!] Jesus answered and said to her...”**

IX. **Matthew 15:28** – “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

“O woman, great is your faith!” What an amazing thing to hear *Jesus* say. Jesus is deeply moved at this woman’s faith. This is the *only* time in *all* of Matthew that Jesus calls *anyone’s* faith “great”. And Jesus emphasizes “great” by putting it *first*: “**O** woman, **GREAT** is your faith!” And then, *finally*, the words that she had been so longing to hear: “Be it done for you as you desire.” “And her daughter was healed instantly”

**Conclusion**

What was it about this Canaanite woman’s faith that made it so great? Was it her *persistence*? Was it the fact that she didn’t give up? Well, that may be part of it, but there’s definitely something more going on here than simple persistence (as important as that may be). Was it the *humility* of this Canaanite woman that made her faith so great? Once again, that may be part of it, but it’s not the whole story. This Canaanite woman didn’t simply believe that Jesus *could* heal her daughter. She didn’t simply believe that Jesus *would* heal her daughter. These same things could be said of many other people, and yet we are never told that Jesus called their faith “great”. What makes the faith of this Canaanite woman so great is that she believed Jesus would heal her daughter *even when Jesus Himself seemed to be saying that He would not*. She is confident that in the end, and *in spite* of His initial silence, and *in spite* of His words to the disciples, and *in spite* of His answer to her... she is *confident* that *in spite of all these things, in the end* He will prove to be her “friend”.

“The greatness of her faith appeared chiefly in this respect, that... she pursued her course steadily through *formidable opposition* [from Christ Himself]; she suffered herself to be *made nothing* [by Christ Himself], *provided that she held by her conviction that she would not fail to obtain Christ’s assistance*; and, in a word, so tempered her confidence with humility, that, while she made no false claims, *neither did she shut against herself the fountain of the grace of Christ.*” (Calvin, slightly modernized)

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\* Cf. Davies and Allison, referenced in France

When it seems that there is every reason to believe that Jesus is saying “no”, faith still believes that Jesus’ *final* answer will be “yes”.

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV) – No matter how many promises God has made, they are “*Yes*” in *Christ*. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.

The “Amen” is our response of *faith* to the promises of God! Faith believes that always behind what seems to be the dark frown on God’s face — always behind this frown is the bright sunshine of His smile (though we are not able to see it). Faith believes that God is good even when it seems that it is *God Himself* who wages war against us.

- ✓ Job 6:4; 16:13 – For the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me... his archers surround me. He slashes open my kidneys and does not spare; he pours out my gall on the ground.
- ✓ Job 19:25-27 – For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!
- ✓ Matthew 27:46 – And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
- ✓ Luke 23:46 – Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.

Faith believes that even God’s “no” is actually His “yes”. Faith believes that for those who love God and are called according to His purpose, God’s final word is only and *always* “yes” (cf. Rom. 8:28)!

Now we don’t have the right today to assume or *expect* physical healings. When Jesus walked this earth, physical healings were a regular and normal part of His ministry. But the fact is that these physical healings were always *temporary* – they were always followed eventually by more sickness and then death. So on the one hand, they could only *point* to the more permanent spiritual blessings of this age of the kingdom. And on the other hand, they could only *anticipate* the permanent *redemption of our bodies* in the age to come. We don’t have the right today to assume or *expect* physical healings, but faith does have every right to humbly, and yet *boldly*(!) stake its claim in the goodness of God – *always believing* that even God’s “no” is actually His *yes*... that God’s *final* word is only and always “**YES** – be it done for you as you desire”. Have we boldly staked our claim in the goodness of God? Would Jesus be able to say to you and me today: “O \_\_\_\_\_, *great* is your *faith*”?