

April 28, 2024

“Faith of a Canaanite”  
Lesson 4

Matthew 15:21-28

**Intro**

Matthew’s Gospel has the most quotations from the OT of any of the gospels. Matthew has about 65 OT references, where Mark has about 30, Luke 26, and John 16. This indicates that Matthew’s focus was toward a primarily Jewish audience. Yet Matthew’s account also shows that Jesus’ ministry and message was intended for Gentiles as well as Jews. His gospel is the only one to record the visit of the Gentile Magi, in chapter 2. It is also the only one to record Jesus’ commission to make disciples “of all nations” in chapter 28. Today’s lesson deals with Jesus’ encounter with a Canaanite woman, a Gentile outside the faith of the Jews. Just prior to this event, in chapter 14 and earlier in chapter 15, Jesus’ disciples have shown little faith in understanding His identity or His teachings, and the Jewish religious leaders are offended by Jesus’ message. The people most expected to accept Jesus and His message failed to understand. Then comes this encounter.

**Read Matthew 15:21-28**

1. vs. 21: Jesus left his confrontation with the Jewish leaders (15:1-9) and went to another area
  - Jesus does this often, withdrawing from crowds to pray alone
  - He also does this to remove Himself from those who do not understand
  - Tyre and Sidon are two important cities on the Mediterranean Sea, north of Galilee
  - They are Gentile cities
  - The Law of Moses teaches to avoid following pagan practices
  - By withdrawing to these cities, Jesus ensures that no Jewish leaders would follow
  - This is the same area of two important miracles by Elijah in 1 Kings 17
  - He provided for a widow in her need, and resurrected the son of another woman
  - Both were Gentiles
  - Matthew may have had these stories in mind as he recounts this particular story
  
2. vs. 22: A Canaanite woman comes to Jesus, seeking help for her demon-possessed daughter
  - The Canaanites were an ancient people, having settled in Palestine before the exodus (Ex.3:8)
  - Mark’s account of this story says the woman was a Greek, born in Syra (7:26)
  - This woman is definitely not of Jewish heritage
  - She would have been seen in a negative light by Jews of this time
  - Mark’s account also says that Jesus entered a house there (7:24)
  - Jesus wanted His presence there to be a secret; he was looking for rest
  - However, “he could not keep his presence a secret”; so the woman comes to Him
  - The woman calls Jesus “Lord, Son of David”
  - This is a uniquely Jewish term for the Messiah who was to come
  - David was a king who established peace in the world for the Jewish people
  - Thus, the Jews expected the Messiah, the “Son of David” to do the same for them
  - Presently, they expect the Messiah to cast out the Romans from Israel
  - It is unusual for a Gentile to use this term in calling out to Jesus
  - It may show genuine belief, or be a term she has heard that will get Jesus’ attention

The woman cries out for mercy, but she asks Jesus to have mercy on her, not her daughter  
No doubt the girl is suffering from this possession  
But the mother asks for personal mercy  
She is her daughter's caretaker  
The challenges of this situation have become a heavy burden for this woman  
She asks Jesus to help her in dealing with this burden

3. vs. 23: Jesus does not answer the woman's plea

This might seem mean or cruel, but it's also reflecting cultural patterns of the day  
Then, it would have been seen as inappropriate for a rabbi to answer a woman  
This is even more true if the woman was a Gentile  
His silence could also be seen as testing the strength of the woman's faith in Him  
His silence gave space and permission for her to explain herself further

The disciples see the woman as a nuisance, and urge Jesus to "send her away"  
We don't know if they thought her unworthy as a Gentile or a woman  
We don't know if her "crying out" annoyed them  
We do know that the disciples prefer to dismiss people they consider annoying  
(see Matt. 19:13)

4. vs. 24: Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel"

It is unclear whether he's replying to the disciples or the woman  
If to the disciples, he's reminding them of what His mission on earth is about  
Jesus preached to the Jews, the "lost sheep of Israel"  
There are multiple verses in the OT describing Israel this way  
Jesus has come as a shepherd for God's lost sheep  
He comes to give spiritual guidance and care  
Matthew's gospel is not, however, anti-Gentile in its view or purpose  
In at least 3 passages, Jesus says that His purpose is to reach Gentiles also

5. vs. 25: The woman tries again by kneeling before Jesus and saying, "Lord, help me!"

She does not dispute with Jesus about what He came to do, and to/for whom  
She merely pleads for help, as a desperate mother

6. vs. 26: Jesus then replies by saying that the bread for the children shouldn't be given to the dogs

Bread represents that which sustains a person's life, in this case, the spiritual truth  
This again highlights Jesus' purpose to the Jews first  
The dogs should not get what the children need, the lack of which would harm them  
Jesus' comparing her to "the dogs" is not mean; it merely indicates the proper order  
The Jews must get God's help first, as His lost sheep  
No one else must be allowed to take away from them

7. vs. 27: The woman replies cleverly and with the truth

She acknowledges that Jesus has come to and for the Jews first

But she also notes that crumbs fall from the table which the dogs then eat

This is noting that the things given to the Jews can also come to the Gentiles

Jesus is not *exclusively* to help the Jews

The non-Jews are not taking anything away from the Jews, only benefitting from scraps

8. vs. 28: Jesus almost never compliments someone publicly for their demonstration of faith

He more often challenges people for their lack of faith (Matt. 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8)

The two He does commend for their faith are both Gentiles—

The Roman centurion in 8:10 and the woman here

Jesus then grants her request, and the daughter is healed “at that moment”

This is similar to the centurion’s servant—both are healed from a distance

Application: The woman in today’s passage is the ultimate “outsider” to a Jewish audience. She was unacceptable to the Jews of the day, and she knew it. To approach a Jewish teach is to face almost certain rejection. Yet she does so anyways. This shows a persistent and strong faith. Jesus grants her the mercy of her daughter’s healing, because Jesus sees her as an “insider”—someone who lives a life of faith. We are called to have a life of great faith. This requires steady confidence that God will meet our needs when we maintain faith in Him.

Prayer: Father God, thank You that we get to be part of Your family. Forgive us for the places where our faith in You is weak, and show us what prevents us from having great faith. Please encourage us when we feel unable to show persistent faith. In Jesus’ name, Amen.