

## The Faith of A Canaanite Woman

Lesson for April 28, 2024

### Unit II: The Measure of Faith

#### Adult Topic: Help for an Outsider

**Background Scripture:** Matthew 15:21-28

**Printed Text:** Matthew 15:21-28

**Key verse:** “Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.” (Matthew 15:28, NIV)

A man named La Piere sent out letters to the managers of 256 hotels and restaurants across the southern half of the U.S. He told them that he was planning to tour the south with two Chinese companions, and he wanted to know ahead of time whether they would be served. Ninety-two percent of the businesses replied that they did not serve Chinese and that La Piere could save himself considerable embarrassment by not showing up with such undesirables. He wasn't surprised. Racial prejudice was a part of southern life in the 1930s, and this was long before a ban was placed on discrimination in interstate commerce. La Piere ignored the managers' advice, however, accompanied by a Chinese man and his wife, he visited every one of the establishments that said they'd refuse service. Surprise! Ninety-nine percent of the places admitted the oriental couple, and almost all did so without a hassle...La Piere's study points up something that's a consistent finding in the field of persuasion – that a person may say he feels one thing, and then turn right around and do something completely different.

Em Griffin, *The Mindchangers*, Tyndale House, 1976, p. 179.

There are systemic problems in society that unfairly restrict access to resources for some while privileging others. How do we overcome the prejudice and hatred that deny some people equal access to resources that protect a decent standard of living? The Canaanite woman understood that Israel's Messiah would one day bring God's reign to all people and, by faith, pressed Jesus to extend that blessing to her even before He had completed His work among the people of Israel. (*Sunday School Commentary*, 2023-2024, Townsend Press, p. 315)

#### Key Terms

1. **Crumbs** (verse 27) – "Possibly the fragments of bread on which the guests wiped their hands (after thrusting them into the common dish), and flung to the dogs" (Farrar, *Life of Christ*, I, 476).
2. **Dogs** (verse 26) – Dogs were used by the Hebrews as a watch for their houses, and for guarding their flocks. There were also then as now troops of semi-wild dogs that wandered about devouring dead bodies and the offal of the streets. Unlike modern culture, dogs, were not house pets.

3. **Sidon** (verse 21) – The Phoenician name *Ṣīdūn* probably meant "fishery" or "fishing town". It was the first home of the Phoenicians on the coast of Canaan, and from its extensive commercial relations became a “great” city (Joshua 11:8, 19:28). It was the mother city of Tyre. It lay within the lot of the tribe of Asher, but was never subdued (Judges 1:31).
4. **Tyre** (verse 21) – Tyre is listed among an alliance of ten nations that would conspire against God's people. Tyre is mentioned in the Book of Isaiah as being forgotten for 70 years when her “fortress is destroyed” and after which “her profit and her prostitute's wages will be sacred to the Lord.” Jesus visited the region or "coasts" (King James Version) of Tyre and Sidon and from this region many came forth to hear him preaching.

### Lesson Background

The book was written by the disciple Matthew, based on both internal evidence and traditions. The Gospel of Matthew mentions coins and accounting more often than the other Gospels (Matthew 17:24; 17:27; 18:24), and constantly refers to Matthew as “Matthew the tax collector,” which was not a badge of honor in that time. Early church fathers such as Clement of Rome, Origen, and Polycarp credited this book to Matthew.

Though Matthew's Gospel was written for all people, its focus is highly Jewish. It opens with a genealogy specific to Abraham and David as Jewish leaders, identifying Jesus as descended from the tribe of Judah. He also quotes from the Old Testament more than sixty times, emphasizing Jesus as the Messiah who fulfilled the Jewish prophecies.

Prior to this week's lesson, Jesus' fame and influence over the people has grown to the point where the religious leaders are concerned about Him. A delegation of Pharisees and scribes travels from Jerusalem to Galilee to challenge Jesus. They pick the issue of ritual handwashing to confront Him. However, they are looking for *any way* to discredit Him. The Pharisees ask why Jesus' disciples break the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before they eat. These “traditions” were rules added to the Law of Moses by prior generations of Pharisees. The current religious leaders honored the elders' wisdom by practicing these additional rules as if they were commands of God. The rules were often designed to keep the people from unknowingly or accidentally breaking one of God's commands (Matthew 15:1–2).

Their challenge is so hypocritical that Jesus doesn't even bother to answer it, at first. Instead, He immediately fires a question of His own: Why do they break the *actual command* of God for the sake of tradition? As Jesus sees it, the Pharisees criticize Him for ignoring tradition in favor of God's actual intent, while they ignore God's intent in favor of tradition! For example, the Pharisees allowed people to claim some of their possessions and money as “devoted to God.” Anything so devoted was meant to be given to the temple. A loophole allowed the people to keep the designated items, and even continue to use them. It had become a way for adult children to avoid caring for their aging parents because all their money and possessions were supposedly “devoted to God” (Matthew 15:3–6).

Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites for allowing this to happen. They cared more about the traditions than the true commands of Scripture. One of Isaiah's prophecies is applied to them: their worship of God is pointless since they replace God's doctrines with human legalism and loopholes (Matthew 15:6–9).

Turning to the people, Jesus then answers the Pharisee's original charge about handwashing. This point can be misunderstood unless one remembers that Jesus is not ignoring Old Testament law, He is accurately expressing it (Matthew 5:19–20). It's not the edible material which enters the body—the physical substance—that causes one to be sinful or unclean. Sin and corruption come from what's inside a person, as it expresses itself on the outside. Jesus explains to the disciples that accidentally eating a speck of unclean food can't defile a person. People are defiled by their own sinfulness, which they express when they speak—or, when they *own* eat that which God has forbidden. He states flatly that eating with unwashed hands has nothing to do with one's spiritual state (Matthew 15:10–20). It is at this point that this week's lesson begins.

## Lesson in Depth

### I. Persistent Faith's Request (Matthew 15:21-25)

**To the region of Tyre and Sidon:** Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities, located some 50 miles (80 kilometers) away. Jesus went all this way to meet this one Gentile woman's need. This shows remarkable and unexpected love from Jesus to this woman of Canaan.

“Matthew's use of the old term ‘Canaanite’ shows that he cannot forget her ancestry: now a descendant of Israel's ancient enemies comes to the Jewish Messiah for blessing.” (Carson)

It was unlikely for Jesus to go to the region of Tyre and Sidon. “At that time, or not much later, Josephus would write: ‘Of the Phoenicians, the Tyrians have the most ill-feeling towards us.’” (Barclay)

**Have mercy on me... My daughter is severely demon-possessed:** This woman came to intercede for her daughter, and she provided a picture of an effective intercessor – her great need taught her how to pray. When she came to Jesus, she made her *daughter's* needs her *own*.

**Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!** This Gentile woman also understood who Jesus was. Many of Jesus' own countrymen didn't know who Jesus was, but this **woman of Canaan** knew.

Perhaps this woman knew that Jesus had healed Gentiles before (Matthew 4:24-25; 8:5-13). Yet what made this encounter unique is that Jesus did those miracles as Gentiles came *to Him* in Jewish territory. Here, Jesus came to Gentile territory and met this woman.

**But He answered her not a word:** Though the Gentile mother interceded for her daughter, Jesus did not immediately give her an encouraging reply. It was not unwillingness to aid her, or neglect of her. His restraint drew a more energetic and faith-filled response from the Gentile woman.

“As Augustine says, ‘The Word spoke not a word,’ and that was so unlike him. He who was always so ready with responses to the cry of grief had no response for her.” (Spurgeon)

**Send her away, for she cries out after us:** It is likely that the disciples meant, “Send her away by giving her what she wants.” It is entirely possible that they just wanted her to go away, and the easiest way was for Jesus to fix her problem.

**Send her away:** “The same verb in Luke 2:29 applies to a dismissal with desire satisfied.” (France)

This woman, by the Israelite law, was unclean, and an Israelite was not even to speak to a Canaanite. This woman was desperate. She was to the point of begging. She had heard the fame of Jesus, and knew if there was help anywhere; it had to be through Jesus. She called Him Son of David (saying by this that He was indeed, an Israelite).

**I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel:** Jesus defined the focus of His mission to His irritated disciples and to the Gentile woman. He made it clear that He was *not* sent to Gentiles like her.

It is fair to ask whether Jesus meant the **lost sheep** *among* the house of Israel, or meant to say that Israel as a whole were lost sheep. Jesus’ instructions to His disciples in Matthew 10:6 (“*go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*”) would seem to imply the latter. The “lost sheep of the house of Israel” were the Jews. He came first to them. He came as their expected Messiah. He came to preach the gospel himself to the Jews only. Afterward it was preached to the Gentiles, but the ministry of Jesus was confined almost entirely to the Jews.

**Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, help me!”** She responded to the rejection from Jesus with increased dedication to prevail with her request. In doing so, the Gentile woman continued to show what a dedicated intercessor does.

“She could not solve the problems of the destiny of her race, and of the Lord’s commission; but she could pray...If, as a Shepherd, he may not gather her, yet, as Lord, he may *help* her.” (Spurgeon)

“I urge you who seek the conversion of others to follow her example. Notice, she did not pray, ‘Lord, help my daughter;’ but, ‘Lord, help *me*.’” (Spurgeon)

“I commend this prayer to you because it is *such a handy prayer*. You can use it when you are in a hurry, you can use it when you are in a fright, you can use it when you have not time to bow your knee. You can use it in the pulpit if you are going to preach, you can use it when you are opening your shop, you can use it when you are rising in the morning. It is such a handy prayer that I hardly know any position in which you could not pray it: ‘Lord, help me.’” (Spurgeon)

## II. Persistent Faith Rewarded (Matthew 15:26-28)

**It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs:** Jesus continued to say discouraging things to the woman.

We are at the great disadvantage of not hearing the tone of Jesus' voice as He spoke to this woman. We suspect that His tone was not harsh; we rather suspect that it was winsome with the effect of inviting greater faith from the woman.

“Its harshest word *dogs* contain a loophole. *Dogs* does not compare Gentiles to the dogs without, in the street, but to the household dogs belonging to the family, which have their portion though not the children's.” (Bruce)

**Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table:** The woman responded with great faith. She admitted her low estate, and did not debate the issue when Jesus called her one of the *dogs*. She did not demand to be seen as a child; but only to be blessed as a dog.

It was as if she said, “Jesus, I understand that the focus of Your ministry is to the Jews – that they have a special place in God's redemptive plan. Yet I also understand that Your ministry extends beyond the Jewish people, and I want to be part of that extended blessing.”

Her response is especially meaningful in light of the increasing rejection of Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders. It was as if the woman said, “I'm not asking for the portion that belongs to the children, just the *crumbs* that they don't want.” In the flow of Matthew's gospel, there was more and more that the Jewish religious establishment did not want to receive.

These were two faith-filled words: **Yet even.** She accepted Jesus' description and asked for mercy despite it – or perhaps because of it. “She would not give over, though he gave her three repulses. So, as she said, like Jacob, *I will not thee go, until thou bless me.* And as he, like a prince, so she, like a princess, prevailed with God and obtained the thing which she desired.” (Poole)

“Dear friend, possibly someone has whispered in your ear, ‘Suppose you are not one of the elect.’ Well, that was very much what our Lord's expression meant to her...Notice that this woman does not battle with that truth at all, she does not raise any question about it; she wisely waives it, and she just goes on praying, ‘Lord, help me! Lord, have mercy upon me!’ I invite you, dear friend, to do just the same.” (Spurgeon)

**Then Jesus answered:** Finally, the woman will receive an encouraging word from Jesus.

**O woman, great is your faith!** Jesus never said this to another person. He complimented the great faith of the Roman centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant (Matthew 8:10), but He said it to the crowd, not to the centurion directly. This Gentile woman heard it from Jesus directly.

Significantly, the only two people to receive this compliment from Jesus were these Gentiles.

This shows us that:

- Great faith may be found in unexpected places – not merely Gentiles, but a *centurion* and a *woman*!
- Great faith is sometimes measured from its disadvantages. Their faith was great because it did not have the advantage of being nourished by the institutions of Judaism.
- Faith is often greatest when it is expressed on behalf of someone else's need.
- **Great is your faith!** “No-one else receives from Jesus the accolade.” (France)

**O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire:** Her faith was **great** enough to receive her request – what she desired from Jesus.

- Her faith was great, even *compared to her other virtues*. She was humble, she was patient, she was persevering, she cared for her child. Yet Jesus didn't compliment any of these good things, but only her *faith*.
- Her faith was great because it was *unlikely*. No one might have expected a Gentile to trust Jesus so much.
- Her faith was great because she *worshipped* Jesus even before she had an answer from Him.
- Her faith was great because it had been *tested so severely*. It's hard to think of a greater test than a demon-possessed child; but her faith was also tried by the seeming indifference or coldness of Jesus.
- Her faith was great because it was *clever*. She turned Jesus' word inside-out and made what might have been taken as an insult as a door open for faith.
- Her faith was great because it concerned *a need right in front of her, and a real need at that*. Many people have faith for everything except those things that are right in front of them.
- Her faith was great because it *would not give up*. She did not stop until she got what she needed from Jesus.
- You could say that *her faith conquered Jesus*. He not only healed her daughter but He did so immediately, something that she had not even asked for.

We read of *nothing else* that Jesus did during this time in Tyre and Sidon. It would seem that His only divine appointment was to meet the need of this woman of faith and her afflicted daughter.

## Lesson Summary

Matthew 15:21-28 contains a number of lessons for us from both the Canaanite woman and Jesus.

### Canaanite Woman<sup>1</sup>:

1. **Persistence in her petition.** The woman's persistence in asking for help, despite initial rejection, demonstrates the power of persistence in prayer or in pursuing one's goals. She was not only persistent but "presented herself in a posture of worship." "*The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.*" (Matthew 15:25) There is power in prayer.
2. **Submission to the Savior.** Even after insults the woman did not argue, but humbly submitted, using His words as an example to illustrate her point. "*Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.*" (Matthew 15:27)
3. **A selfless motivation.** The woman's daughter was healed because she brought her issue to the Master. Because she persisted her daughter was healed. *Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.*" (Matthew 15:28)

### Jesus

4. **Inclusivity and compassion.** While Jesus initially indicates a focus on the house of Israel, the woman's faith leads Him to extend his healing to her daughter, showing that God's love and mercy are not limited to a particular group or ethnicity.
5. **Humility and openness.** Jesus, the teacher, is willing to learn from the woman's response, demonstrating that wisdom and understanding can come from unexpected sources.

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<sup>1</sup> Points two and three are taken primarily from a sermon by Rev. Dr. Howard-John Wesley, "*I'm Speaking*". March 20-21, 2021.