

The Faith of the Canaanite Woman – Matthew 15:21-28

In today's passage we get to see a conversation between Jesus and a Canaanite woman that will probably make us feel a little uncomfortable. We will meet a Jesus who is very unlikeable and who acts in a way that we do not expect him to. But we will also see that Jesus has a plan to use this conversation to teach the disciples a very important truth about God's Kingdom.

Jesus Withdraws

This story begins with Jesus and his disciples withdrawing to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This may have been so that Jesus could get some rest away from the crowds, or possibly to avoid the Pharisees who were becoming increasingly angry with Jesus and his teachings. In either case, Jesus is purposely leaving the region of Galilee, and the Israelites, and going into foreign Gentile territory. In Mark's account of this storyⁱ, Mark fills in the detail that Jesus and his disciples were staying in someone's house in the hope that their presence would remain a secret. However, news of Jesus' arrival spreads, and the minute that this Canaanite woman hears that Jesus is there, she rushes over to see him, because her daughter is suffering terribly which we read in verse 22

Matthew 15:22 - A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

A Canaanite Woman's Plea and Jesus Response

In the woman, we meet a desperate mother, who wants her daughter to be healed. Matthew describes the woman as Canaanite, which is important. This woman who comes to Jesus is not an Israelite, which Matthew highlights so that he can compare her against the two previous groups of Israelites who have already either opposed or misunderstood Jesus in Matthew 15. We see earlier in chapter 15 that some Pharisees, that is the teachers of God's Law, come to Jesus to ask him why the disciples don't follow the traditions of the elders and do the ceremonial hand washing before they eat. Jesus then uses this opportunity to not only rebuke the Pharisees, because they have elevated their traditions over God's Law, but to also teach the disciples and crowd that it is what comes out of a person's mouth, not what goes in, that makes a person unclean. At this, the Pharisees become angry, and reject Jesus.

Then we have the disciples, who misunderstand who Jesus is. Now this is hard to understand given that they have spent everyday living and doing life with Jesus for the last year or so. They have had front row seats to his teachings and his miracles. But yet they did not understand what Jesus meant when he taught them about uncleanness earlier in chapter 15, and even from what we have seen in the last few weeks, they still have not fully understood who Jesus is. But this woman seems to know a lot about who Jesus is. She refers to Jesus as 'Son of David' which is a reference to Jesus Kingship, particularly over the Nation of Israel. She acknowledges and believes that Jesus is not just the rightful King of Israel, but also the Messiah, the Promised King, who had come to save Israel. She would have been aware of the long-standing rivalry between the Israelites and the Canaanites, but yet she still calls Jesus Lord. Jesus describes the disciples as 'You of little faith', but yet we see this woman described as having 'great faith'. The woman has probably heard the stories of Jesus' miracles and teaching, and so she has come to him, knowing and trusting that He can heal her daughter. But Jesus' response to the woman is quite unusual. Even quite confronting.

Matthew 15:23 - Jesus did not answer a word.

His response to the woman is silence. Jesus does not initially acknowledge the woman, her situation or her desperation. She meets all of the criteria that Jesus would normally expect to see in those who come to Him; She addresses him correctly. She humbles herself before Jesus. She believes that Jesus will heal her daughter. Yet Jesus remains silent. It seems to go against everything we know about who Jesus is. Why would Jesus stay silent? Jesus wants to test the perseverance of the woman's faith, and then use this to teach the disciples something new about God's Kingdom

The Disciples Interjection and Jesus Response

The Disciples, having heard the woman's cries, and having seen Jesus' silence, think that it is time to do something.

Matthew 15:23 - *So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."*

Just like in the stories of the feedings, the disciples want Jesus to send the woman away from them. But there is a difference in what the disciples expect Jesus to do. In the feeding stories, the disciples want Jesus to merely tell the crowds to leave, mostly so they don't have to feed them. But in this story, what the disciples are asking Jesus to do is to heal her first, and then send her away. The disciples want Jesus to do a miracle so that this woman would leave them alone. Whilst this may seem compassionate from the disciples, their interjection isn't because they are concerned for the woman, but rather because if they can hear her cries, then everyone else can hear her, which goes against the idea that they wanted to be hidden. But Jesus isn't just going to give the disciples what they want – and thus he responds to the disciples

Matthew 15:24 - *He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."*

Again, Jesus' response is confronting to our ears. His response very much feels like a 'That is not my job' or a 'That is above my pay grade' kind of response. The kind of response that you hear from a work colleague who doesn't want to do something that they are asked to do outside of their job description. The problem here is that Jesus seems to be refusing the woman's needs because she is not an Israelite. But Jesus wants to remind the disciples of his mission on earth. His purpose was to seek out and save those who were lost from God's chosen people - the Israelites. As the King of Israel, his mission was to seek out his spiritually lost sheep. The disciples would have understood this sheep language – we see this reference throughout the Old Testament, when God often describes his people like that as 'Sheep without a Shepherd' as they reject and wander away from Him. Jesus wants to make it clear that his mission is to bring salvation to God's Children. And this shouldn't surprise us, given all of Jesus' ministry to this point has been in Israelite territory. In Matthew 10, when Jesus sends the disciples out to preach the gospel, he directly tells them

Matthew 10:5 - *These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel."*

Jesus makes it clear that his mission was to seek and find the lost sheep of Israel. But the Bible also talks about how salvation will come first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile. As God's people reject Jesus as their King and the salvation he offers, this salvation then becomes available for those who are not from the nation of Israel. This salvation becomes available to all of those who are spiritually lost, which as we will see, includes this Canaanite woman and her daughter

The Woman's Cry and Jesus Response

As the woman reaches Jesus and the disciples, she kneels before Jesus, begging for mercy for her daughter. She humbles herself before Jesus, recognising both his Kingship and his power. We don't know if she has heard the conversation Jesus has just had with His disciples, but if she has, it will not discourage her.

Matthew 15:25 - The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

Just like any parents would for their sick child, the woman is begging Jesus for his help. Finally, Jesus, the only person who could heal her daughter, has come. At this point we would expect Jesus to reward her persistence. We want the story to finish here with Jesus saying - 'Woman, you have great faith' and her daughter be healed. But Jesus wants to draw out more of this woman's faith.

Matthew 15:26 - He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

The language that Jesus uses would have resonated with this woman. Whilst the Israelites considered dogs as unclean and wild animals, it was quite common for Gentiles to have dogs as pets. The woman would have understood this language. Just like how we do today. Dogs are now far more common as pets, and we spoil our dogs a lot more than those in the first Century could have, but the principle still applies. No parent would cook dinner for their child and then allow the dog to eat it first. If you have both children and a dog, you might feel like the dinner you cook for your children is basically given straight to the dog. But you wouldn't feed the dog first and expect your children to eat what was left over. But there is more to what Jesus is saying here.

In 30AD, and for most of history, bread has been a symbol for life. If you had bread, you ate. And if you ate - you stayed alive. Jesus often uses bread to teach truths about God's Kingdom. Think back to the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 we looked at a few weeks ago. In John's accountⁱⁱ of the story, Jesus calls himself the Bread of Life, and claims that whoever believes in Him will never be spiritually hungry again. Jesus compares the bread he had just fed the crowd, which keeps them sustained for only a little while, to Himself, who will sustain them and give them eternal life. The bread is a symbol of God's salvation. The same is true in Jesus statement. In today's passage, the children that Jesus speaks of - are the Israelites, God's chosen people and the dogs are those who are outside the nation of Israel - the Gentiles. What Jesus is basically saying here is - Why should I give you the salvation that is supposed to be for Israel?

What Jesus says is quite offensive. Almost Un-Jesus like. How could Jesus be so inconsiderate to this woman? There seems to be a role reversal here. Jesus seems to set himself up like the Pharisees with their mentality of 'Only the Israelites can be saved' and 'We are so much better than the Gentiles'. But Jesus has another plan - and the woman's response is exactly what we have come to expect Jesus to say to the Pharisees.

The Woman's Faith and Jesus Response

Matthew 15:27 - "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

The woman cries out once more for mercy. One last desperate plea. 'Jesus - even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall under the table'. The woman appeals for even just the smallest amount of mercy for the sake of her daughter. The same mercy that the Israelites continued to reject. You can imagine the woman extending on Jesus' statement saying 'It is right for you to give it, since the children do not want it'. And you can imagine her response being that it is right for Jesus to show her the mercy of the King, despite her not being 'at the table'. Whilst she does not have a seat at the table, she is still part of the household, and her trust is that even

a crumb sized portion of Jesus' mercy will be powerful enough to heal her daughter. Having heard this response, Jesus praises the faith of the woman

Matthew 15:28 - Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

Jesus praises her faith in front of the disciples and heals her daughter. Her persistence paid off. The crumb that she so desperately longed for was enough to heal her daughter. Mark tells us that the woman then leaves Jesus and finds her daughter at home lying on her bed no longer demon possessed. Even more so, the woman seems to have understood something about Jesus that the disciples and Pharisees hadn't understood yet. Jesus wasn't the hope for only Israel. He wasn't the Promised King of just the Israelites. He was the promised king for the whole world, and his salvation would be offered to all nations. Jesus uses this opportunity to teach the disciples that even the Gentile nations would be offered salvation and healing. Jesus will go on to laterⁱⁱⁱ tell the parable of the Great Banquet, which is all about how the Israelites reject their seats and right to be at the banquet, and how God brings in the Gentiles to have a seat at the table of the Wedding of the Lamb, when Jesus returns to be with his People.

Our seat at the Masters Banquet

And this should be of great comfort to us. For this is just as true for us as it was for the Canaanite woman. The Israelites continued to reject Jesus as their king. And as they did, Jesus offered his salvation to the Gentile nations. The more we read the gospels, the more we see that Jesus is not just the King of Israel, but the King of all nations. And that should fill us with thankfulness. Thankfulness for the salvation that Jesus brings to us as those who are not born Israelite. When we trust in Jesus, we don't assume the position of the family pet, but we are given the title 'Child of God' and reserved a seat at the table. And as children, we are given the whole banquet to feast on, not just the crumbs from under the table. All the blessings and promises that were once given to the Israelites are now ours. All the benefits of being God's children are now ours for eternity. What a wonderful joy and privilege that is for us.

The other lesson we can learn from this story is that our prayer life should be filled with persistence. The Canaanite woman would not give up until Jesus healed her daughter. We too, in our prayer life should be persistent in the things that we pray for. Just to clarify, I am not saying that we should pray in a way that nags God in the hope that he will get sick of our praying and just give us what we want. Because we see in the story that Jesus does not get sick of her persistence and just gave her what she wanted. But often, at least in my own prayer life, I will pray for something once, and then if God does not answer it, I can become discouraged and stop praying for it. Just because God may not answer our prayers the first time, does not mean he will not answer them eventually. So, keep praying for those people who you have been praying for to come to know Jesus. Do not give up and think that God won't do anything. But rather, trust that God will open their eyes to the truth of the Gospel and welcome them into the Great Banquet.

ⁱ Mark 7:24-30

ⁱⁱ John 6:25-59

ⁱⁱⁱ The Parable of the Great Banquet is found in Luke 14:15-23 & Matthew 22:1-14