

Matthew 15:21-28

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Jesus travels to the Gentile province of Tyre. A Canaanite woman begs Him to heal her daughter. At first Jesus refuses, because He was sent to Israel. But as the woman persists in her great faith, Jesus grants her request.

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Mark 7:24-30.

Matthew reports that after His encounter with the Pharisees from Jerusalem *Jesus went away from the province of Galilee and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon.*

Tyre and Sidon were ancient, coastal *cities* located north of Galilee along the Mediterranean Sea, in modern Lebanon. *Sidon* was founded by Canaanites (Genesis 10:15, 10:19, I Chronicles 1:13). Joshua and the generation that followed were unable to conquer these *cities* (Joshua 11:8, Joshua 19:29, Judges 1:31). Shipping goods appears to have been their major industry from at least as early as the time of Israel's Kings until the time of Christ (Nehemiah 13:6, Isaiah 23:2). Both *cities* were associated with the Philistines (Jeremiah 47:4, Joel 3:4) and the Phoenicians. *Tyre and Sidon* had a corrupting influence upon God's people and led them to worship false gods (Judges 10:6).

Previously in Matthew, *Jesus* mentioned *Tyre and Sidon* as examples to shame the citizens of Chorazin and Bethsaida for their lack of repentance despite the many miracles He performed among them.

“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.”
(Matthew 11:21-22)

In *Jesus's* day the port cities of *Tyre and Sidon* were located in the Roman province or *district of Tyre*. The people who lived there were of *Canaanite* descent and had a pagan culture.

Neither Matthew, nor Mark (who also describes this journey) give a full explanation as to why *Jesus* withdrew to this Gentile district (Mark 7:24-37). On at least two separate occasions *Jesus* took evasive action to preemptively save His life. Once he avoided going to Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill *Him* (John 7:1). And another time *He withdrew* from the Pharisees (Matthew 12:14-15). Perhaps *He* was employing a similar tactic here to avoid further confrontations with the Pharisees from Jerusalem.

Or perhaps *He* wanted a time and place where He could be alone or train His disciples without constant interruption. Upon arriving in the city of *Tyre* “[*Jesus*] entered a house,” and according

to Mark, “*He* wanted no one to know of it” (Mark 7:24). Maybe *Jesus* came to *Tyre* in order to get some rest from the crowds.

Whatever His purposes, a *Canaanite woman from that region* approached *Him* and began to make an unwanted scene. Apparently, someone told *her* who *Jesus* was because Mark tells us that *she came* “after hearing of *Him*” (Mark 7:25). This is not surprising. Matthew has already informed his readers how the wonderful news about *Jesus* and His amazing miracles had spread throughout all that land (Matthew 9:31). People came from far away to see *Jesus* perform miracles or to be healed by *Him*. *This Canaanite woman* may have even traveled the roughly thirty miles to Galilee to see *Jesus* herself. At the very least she had heard stories about what *He* could do.

In any event, *she began to cry out, saying* “*Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.*” Matthew includes the Present-Active-Continuous Greek participle for *saying* to indicate how this *woman* was repeating her request again and again. She knew of and had *faith* in *Jesus*’s miraculous ability and authority over the demons. Given the reports and eyewitness accounts this is hardly news. But what is astonishing is that this desperate *Canaanite woman* recognized *Jesus* for who *He* was—the Jewish Messiah! *She called Him* by His kingly Messianic title, “*Son of David.*”

She repeatedly begged *Jesus* to *have mercy on her* by exorcising a cruel *demon* from possessing *her daughter*. At first, *Jesus* was silent did not respond to *her* with a single word. But she persisted. As the situation grew more uncomfortable *His disciples came and implored Him, saying, Send her away because she keeps shouting at us.* They too were persistent in their imploring. (Matthew uses the same participle for *saying*, indicating their continuous repetition.) But *she* continued to *cry out*.

Finally, *Jesus* gave *her* an *answer*. It was a firm “No.” *He said, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* What are we to make of *His answer*?

While in a larger sense *Jesus* came to reconcile the entire cosmos and this included everyone (Jew and Gentile) who believed in *His* name (John 3:16), but we must remember that this was not the primary focus of *His* earthly mission and ministry. The primary objective of *His* earthly mission appears to be to proclaim and establish *His* kingdom. And this kingdom-offer was to be first delivered to *the house of Israel* (Matthew 10:5-7), in part because the kingdom was first promised to David, as we find in 2 Samuel:

“The Lord also declares to you that the Lord will make a house for you. When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom.”

(2 Samuel 7:11b-12)

“Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.’ In accordance with all these words and all this vision, so Nathan spoke to David.”
(2 Samuel 7:16-17)

Jesus was David's long-awaited descendant. *He* was the Messiah. And as the everlasting King any blessing or miracle *Jesus* gave would by virtue of *His* office pertain to the kingdom and was by right not to be offered to the Gentiles until it was made available to the Jews first. This may help explain why *Jesus* initially refused to heal *the Canaanite woman's daughter*.

If this was the case, what are we to make of *Jesus's* miracles where *He* healed the Roman Centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5-13) or the exorcism of the two violently *demon-possessed* men among the Greeks in the Decapolis (Matthew 8:28-34)? Perhaps, *Jesus* was more lenient towards those Gentiles because they were aliens in the land, which according to the Law of Moses were to be cared and provided for, just as those in Israel. However, *Jesus* is no longer in Israel at the time of this episode.

Another possible reason for why *Jesus* did not immediately help this *woman* was that *He* was simply testing and creating an opportunity for *her* to display her great *faith*.

After *Jesus* refused *the Canaanite woman's* request to help *her demon-possessed daughter*, the *woman* became even more desperate. *She came and began to bow down before Him*, and she was crying "Lord, help me!" She was now begging at *Jesus* feet for *Him* to take pity and *have mercy* upon *her*. *Jesus* still refused.

He answered back, It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. In this case *the children* referred to the Jews, the rightful inheritors of the kingdom. *The bread* was the beneficence and *mercy* of the King. And *the dogs* was an unflattering term for the Gentiles. *Jesus* was explaining to *her*, that just as *it would not be good* for a father *to take his children's food and throw it to the dogs*, neither would *it be good* for the Jewish Messiah to give the kingdom mercies promised to the Jews *and throw them to the Gentiles*.

In one of the Bible's more memorable comebacks, she replied, *Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table*.

Her reaction was respectful, witty, sincere, and compelling. She did not begin by taking offense or challenging what *Jesus* had just said to her. She agreed with *Jesus*. *Yes, Lord that it is not good* for the Jewish Messiah *to throw away* the blessings intended for the Jews *to a Gentile like her*. Extending *Jesus's* analogy, *she* went onto explain that *even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master's table*. In other words, surely *Jesus* had some left-over *crumbs of mercy* which could heal this *Canaanite woman's daughter*.

Jesus was moved by *her great faith*. Then *He* said to *her*, *O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed at once*.

This is the second instance Matthew records where *Jesus* remarked upon the greatness of another's *faith*. And interestingly, both were applied to Gentiles. The first time was the Roman Centurion (Matthew 8:10). And the second is this *Canaanite woman*. In between these two episodes, *Jesus* has repeatedly remarked upon the amazing lack of *faith* (and repentance) that *Israel* had in *Him*, their Messiah (Matthew 11:20; 12:39-42; 13:57-58). It was ironic that in some cases Gentiles could better see and receive *Jesus* for who He was than the Jews He came to save.

Jesus going to the region of Tyre and Sidon parallels the episode Jesus noted in the gospel of Luke to his hometown folks in Nazareth. They rejected Him, and Jesus noted that during the days of Elijah there were many widows in Israel, but the widow Elijah ministered to was a widow in Sidon. (This illustration was not well received). (Luke 4:23-30).

As the Apostle John notes:

“He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.”
(John 1:11)

This irony also parallels the apparent fact that the sinners better recognized Jesus as the Messiah than the religious leaders.

“Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you.”
(Matthew 21:31b)

All of this might be an application how “the last shall be first, and the first, last” (Matthew 20:16).

Biblical Text

15:21-28 Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.” But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, “Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.” But He answered and said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus said to her, “O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed at once.