

Text: Matthew 15:21-28 // Mark 7:24-30

Title: Great Gentile Faith

Truth: Faith saves, not ethnic background.

Date/Location: February 9, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

A casual reading of this passage could raise some wrong and even blasphemous ideas, especially in our overly sensitive culture. For example: Was the Lord rude and unkind when he initially ignored the lady? Was he mean or racist to speak about throwing crumbs to dogs? Did the woman really have faith or was she just clever in how she replied to the Lord?

Part of the problem is that the text does not tell us background information on the woman. But it tells us enough that we can figure out something about her. Another problem is that we were not there nor did we live in the culture at the time, so we cannot definitively say what would be offensive or not in this kind of situation.

I. The Awful Circumstances, v. 21-22

- A. Tyre and Sidon are quite a distance northwest of the Sea of Galilee, about 40 miles to Tyre, and another 25 miles north along the coast to Sidon.
- B. A woman from that region found Jesus there. She was a woman of Canaan, a Gentile, and a Syrophenician by birth. How they knew all of this is not told us. It seems there must have been some conversation after the initial encounter.
- C. All that is fine, but the bad part comes in when the woman says that her daughter is demon-possessed. How she knows this we are not told, but we can be assured that since Scripture says so, it is true. She is obviously desperate to find help for her daughter, as most parents would be. She says that the daughter is *severely* demon-possessed. Just to be demon-possessed is terrible enough, but *severely* so is awful.

D. We can only speculate as to what the girl's "symptoms" were, but from other such situations we can suggest a few possibilities:

1. Violent – Matthew 8:28.
2. Unable to speak – Matthew 9:32, although this may have been an additional symptom not caused by the demon possession.
3. Blind, mute – Matthew 12:22.
4. Self-harm – Matthew 17:14-18.
5. Shrieking – Acts 8:7.
6. Sorcery, divination, or fortune-telling – Acts 16:16.
7. Super-human strength – Acts 19:15-16.

II. The Lord's Initial Responses, v. 23-26

The woman was persistent.

- A. The Lord did not answer the woman's request. This seems very unkind.
- B. The disciples were greatly annoyed by the repeated asking of this woman, and they asked the Lord to send her away.
- C. We must note two things: **First**, the Lord's mission was Jewish-centric. He was specifically sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (v. 24), and He instructed His disciples the same (10:5-6). These are the only two times, by the way, where "house of Israel" is found in Matthew's gospel, and it only occurs two other times in Acts and two other times in Hebrews. **Second**, the Lord knew what was about to happen and that it would provide a great illustration of strong faith for His disciples and all later Bible-readers.
- D. The woman continued to come, and at last fell at his feet and begged for His help. She "worshipped" the Lord, meaning that she bowed low before Him.
- E. The Lord spoke of taking what belonged to the children and giving it to the dogs.

The word *dogs* is translated as "little dogs" in the NKJV. None of the other English translations have that phrase, which seems to be

an attempt to soften the blow of what Jesus is saying. The word *dogs* can express a diminutive force (a “little” pet) or it may not. The idea seems to be a house pet, rather than a large, wild, stray mongrel dog.

The figure is clear enough—you don’t feed animals with food that is needed by people. As it relates to the situation, the Lord was saying that He could not take the power / miracles / teaching that He was doing (that’s the food) for Israel (they are the children) and apply it to the Gentiles (they are the dogs). It was not *for* the Gentiles. Remember, the Lord was offering the kingdom to Israel if they would repent and so come into a right relationship with the King. Until that happened, Gentiles were—in that program—out in the cold.

- F. About dogs...we just read about man’s furry best friend when we studied Philippians 3:2. Those were the false teachers, not man’s best friend. Here, it is a reference to non-Jews.
- G. This may have had a reverse-effect on the woman than what we think. Instead of offending her, it was just what the Lord knew she would be ready for to express her faith. Perhaps the Lord knew that the woman understood Jesus’s ministry was to Jews primarily. She understood what he was talking about and was ready to express faith in that context.

Perhaps in her mind or that of her general culture, Jews were dogs too. But now she was coming to one for help and learning that “salvation comes from the Jews” (John 4:22).

III. The Woman’s Faith-Filled Reply, v. 27-28

- A. The woman was witty and quick on her feet. She responded along the same line about the children’s food, saying that the accidental (or purposeful?) crumbs that fall from the table *are* enjoyed by the dogs. That is to say, she agrees with the Lord’s point that His mission is to the Jews. But other people can benefit from His work as well. How true!!
- B. Based on the Lord’s declaration that the woman had great faith, I believe that her insight extended beyond mere wittiness. She was expressing that she knew Jesus could heal and would do so for

someone who believed in Him. She must have heard of his miraculous works in the south country and knew that no one else was able to help her.

C. It is almost as if the Lord could not help *but* reply with an affirmative answer for the woman because of her great faith. Just like a lack of faith hindered the Lord's work in Nazareth (Matthew 13:58), here it compelled His work!

Conclusion

The woman was a Gentile, but she had great faith. Thank the Lord that He receives Gentiles as well as Jews. Faith is the basis of that acceptance—not ethnicity or any other “human” characteristic!

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