

Sent To The Lost Sheep

Matthew 15:21-28

21 And going away from there, Jesus withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. **22** And behold, 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.” **23** But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and were pleading with Him, saying, “Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.” **24** But He answered and said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” **25** But she came and was bowing down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” **26** And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” **27** But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” **28** Then Jesus answered and 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. (Matthew 15:21-28)

THE SETTING

Matthew 15:21

And going away from there, Jesus withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. (Matthew 15:21)

Tyre and Sidon were very ancient port cities on the Mediterranean Sea. Both became known for their wickedness and idolatry, and God pronounced judgment against them in Ezekiel 28. They were known for their abundant iniquities, unrighteous trade, and perverse idolatry.

THE CANAANITE WOMAN

Matthew 15:22

And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out ... (Matthew 15:22)

Who were the Canaanites? The Canaanites were descendants of Noah’s grandson, Canaan. They occupied the land north of Egypt along the Mediterranean

coast. The first city in Canaan was called Ugarit. Ugarit lost its independence, falling first to the Hittites and then to the Egyptians. There is some evidence that the Canaanites and Philistines (from which we get the word “Palestine”) were the same people, “Canaanite” being a regional description rather than a tribal name. A variety of tribal groups were “Canaanites.” They were all polytheists worshiping various gods, including El, Ba’al, and Asherah. All of them were known for perverse sexual practices and violence against their neighbors. The very name “Canaanite” carried evil implications.

By the first century the label “Canaanite” was not really used, being replaced by Phoenician.

Just as Jesus deliberately passed through Samaria in order to speak to the woman at the well, He deliberately goes to the Mediterranean coast to encounter this woman. Let’s see what happens when they meet.

THE PETITION

Matthew 15:22

And behold, 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.” (Matthew 15:22)

When Lucifer rebelled against God, he and one-third of the angels were cast out of heaven. Their primary focus has been to spoil God’s purposes for mankind, first by tempting man into sinning against God, and then by deceiving man into worshiping virtually anything but God. Satan and his demons have always harrassed and dominated people. Some pagan peoples even deliberately invited evil spirits into

them in religious ceremonies. I know a missionary who has served in Laos for decades. She has been invited to “spirit calling” ceremonies, where people sit around a small altar holding strings, and invite spirits to travel down the strings and enter their bodies.

The behavior of demons in the Gospels seems to be unusual, though. “Have you come to torment us before The Time?” demons cried out to Jesus in Matthew 8:29. Perhaps the presence of the Son of God on earth was enough to drive them into a hysterical frenzy of fear and panic. Without question the entire demonic realm was aware of that the Eternal Son of God had taken on human flesh and was casting demons out of people and into the darkness beyond. His coming meant that the day of their judgment was that much closer.

TRANSITION: One of those foul creatures took dominion over this Canaanite woman’s little girl and tormented her cruelly. She had nowhere to go, and then she heard that Jesus had come to the area. Full of desperation, she runs to Jesus for help.

EXTRAORDINARY FAITH

Matthew 15:22

And behold, 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.” (Matthew 15:22)

This Canaanite woman, raised in a pagan society, exhibited remarkable understanding and faith.

She cried out for mercy. In the Bible mercy always means relief from some kind of suffering. The worst sort of suffering, of course, is guilt and conviction over sin. In its grandest sense, mercy brings forgiveness for sin when only judgment is deserved, and the removal of divine punishment when that punishment is right and just.

As you read the Gospels you will see that many people came to Jesus for help, but only three conditions brought about a call for mercy: leprosy, blindness, and demon possession. Aside from death itself, these are the most extreme circumstances anyone could face. All three isolate people from society, and represent spiritual isolation from God.

This woman's plea for mercy was an admission of defeat: "I can't handle this on my own." It was an admission of helplessness: "There is no hope for me if You do not act." It was an admission of humility: "I don't deserve help, and I have nothing to offer You in return." It was also a confession of the greatness of Jesus: "You alone can help me!" And it was recognition of His divine goodness: "I can ask You this without fear."

She addressed Jesus as Lord. In that time, "Lord" could be used in a polite, formal sort fashion, just as we use "sir" or "ma'am" today.

Is that what we see here? Does this woman, whose daughter is suffering so greatly, calmly walk up to Jesus and say, "Excuse me, sir, but if you have a moment there is something I would like to ask."

No, of course not. Matthew 15:23 says that she was shouting and shrieking. She

was full of desperation for her daughter. When she called Jesus “Lord” she was not being polite, she was pleading with God in human flesh from the very depth of her being.

The text is not saying that this Canaanite woman had a fully formed doctrine of Jesus Christ. But it is clear that she recognized both His divine power and divine authority. His power was sufficient to cast out the demon from her daughter. His authority was greater than that of the demon, and so Jesus could not be resisted.

She submitted to Jesus’ earthly authority. She confessed Him as the Son of David, the rightful King of the Jews. “Son of David” was a Messianic title. He would fulfill God’s promises to David and bring the rule of God to earth. But “Son of David” is also such a strongly Messianic phrase that you would expect only Jews to use it. And with the exception of this woman, only Jews do use it. This woman, the descendant of many generations of pagan idol worshipers who were bitter enemies of Israel, bends her knee and acknowledges that Jesus is her rightful King.

She asked Jesus for mercy – **that’s hope.**

She confessed Jesus as Lord – **that’s worship.**

She acknowledged Jesus as King – **that’s submission.**

JESUS’ SILENCE

Matthew 15:23

But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and were pleading with Him, saying, “Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.” (Matthew 15:23)

Now, back in Matthew 10 Jesus sent His disciples out on a short-term mission trip:

And summoning His twelve disciples, Jesus gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.
(Matthew 10:1)

They returned rejoicing that all had happened just as He had promised. Even the demons were subject to them (Luke 10:17). But the power they had exercised was only loaned to them, and it was rescinded when they returned. The apostles of Jesus didn't do any miracles again until the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.

So consider this from their perspective. The woman is shouting at them to heal her daughter and won't stop. Jesus isn't showing any sign of casting out the demon, and they don't have the ability. They can only think of one solution: send her away. I find it interesting that they don't petition to Jesus on her behalf. Instead, they petition Him on THEIR behalf: send her away, she's annoying us.

JESUS' RESPONSE

Matthew 15:24

But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matthew 15:24)

When Jesus does speak it seems like a refusal. He was not sent to Canaanites, but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Just who IS the house of Israel?

For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's seed [that is, ethnic Jews], but: "through Isaac your seed will be named." That is, the children of the FLESH [those who are ethnic Jews] are NOT the children of God, but the children of the PROMISE [all who have been saved by grace through faith, whether Jew or Gentile] ARE considered as seed. (Romans 9:6-8)

In Romans 4:11 Abraham is called "the father of all who believe without being circumcised," that is, Gentiles who believe.

For this reason [justification] is **by faith**, in order that it may be **according to grace**, so that the promise will be guaranteed to **all the seed**, not only to **those who are of the Law**, but also to **those who are of the faith of Abraham**, who is the father of us all (Romans 4:16)

So, who is the house of Israel? Not those who are biologically related to Abraham, but those who believe the promise God made to Abraham, regardless of their biology. Abraham himself was not a Jew. He was a Gentile from the area we know as Iraq. His ancestors, including his own father, were pagans and idol worshipers (Joshua 24:2). While Abraham was an idol worshiper God called him according to His grace, and Abraham was justified by faith in the promise of God.

And who, then, are the lost sheep of the house of Israel? That's now an easy question to answer. They are the men and women who by God's grace are intended to inherit the Kingdom by faith, but remain under the judgment of God for sin. Jesus came to seek and save that which is lost, not "lost" by every possible definition of the word, but the lost sheep of the house of Israel, such as this woman.

THE PROMISE BUILDS FAITH

Matthew 15:25

But she came and was bowing down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” (Matthew 15:25)

The woman’s faith changes. She is no longer frantic; she bows. She is no longer shouting; she speaks. “Lord, help me!” It’s possible that in her desperation she has become exhausted and almost resigned to her situation. I think that something else has happened. I think that this woman, hearing Jesus’ promise of being sent for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, understands by faith that SHE is one of those lost sheep. “He did not just come for them,” she thinks to herself. “He has come for me.” Her faith has grown quickly, but how much?

FAITH IS TESTED

Matthew 15:26

And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” (Matthew 15:26)

This sounds cruel, I know, especially in our time when everyone is assumed to have the right to everything.

But Jesus was not being cruel, nor was He insulting her. He was using an illustration to reveal why He had come and what limits He Himself put on His saving work.

You see, Jesus did not come to the earth to make every situation right for every person. He did not come to be a mediator for personal disputes. He came to seek and save that which is lost. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. He came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

From God's side there is a clear difference between the elect and the reprobate, between those to whom God grants salvation and those whom God leaves to their rightful judgment. But from the human side of things it's not so clear. What distinguishes the elect from the reprobate, the children from the dogs?

Faith in Jesus Christ.

And we see this Canaanite woman exhibit tremendous faith.

But she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." (Matthew 15:27)

She acknowledges the truth of what Jesus said. Israel was the chosen nation; she admits that. As a Gentile she has no claim on God; she admits that. Personally she had done nothing to deserve mercy, and much to deserve judgment; she admits that.

But she also knows that the One True God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. She knows that Jesus is Lord, that somehow the power of God and the character of God are fully present within Him. She is so convinced that Jesus is filled with the holiness, righteousness, and goodness of God that she asks in faith, expecting that He will answer her prayer.

And He does.

FAITH IS PROVEN

Matthew 15:28

Then Jesus answered and 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. (Matthew 15:28)

If you read the Gospels carefully you will see that Jesus only praised the faith of two people. He praised the faith of the Roman centurion in Matthew 8:10 (Luke 7:9). And He praised the faith of this Canaanite woman in our passage today. He never praised the faith of His disciples. In fact, He rebuked His disciples for their little faith (Matthew 8:26, 16:8, 17:20). He rebuked Peter for his little faith when he sank into the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:31).

There is a miracle in this passage, but it's not the ejection of the demon. That event isn't even described. The miracle is that Canaanite woman, raised in polytheism and paganism, of a people that historically hated Israel and Israel's God, has come to deep faith in the Son of David, the Jewish Messiah. As Romans 4:16 says, she was of the faith of Abraham. She believed the promise of God.

BRINGING IT HOME

It is a trustworthy saying and deserving full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost. (1 Timothy 1:15)

This is the belief of every true Christian. The longer we grow in spiritual maturity, the more we recognize our own sinfulness and depravity, and the more we rest upon the grace and mercy of our Savior and Lord.

Mature Christians don't claim to be right with God because of anything they have done, but only by what Jesus has done. Oh, there is a time for many young Christians when they think they've done God a big favor by believing in His Son. He lets us sweat under the burden of our own weakness and sin, just as He let Israel struggle with the nations in the land, to teach us that we have nothing in ourselves to

be proud of. We should boast in Jesus Christ, to be sure, but never in ourselves.

I think most of us are a little uncomfortable with Jesus' response to this woman: "it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Some might even be offended. But the Lord spoke as He spoke, full of goodness and grace and justice and righteousness.

We must not speak that way to people; He knew this woman better than she knew herself. But at the same time we must not think that we need to "sell" Jesus to anyone, or try to smooth off His rough edges to make Him more appealing to sinners, or edit Him to be nothing more than a two-dimensional fairytale character. He is the Lord of glory. His call to believe is not an invitation but a command. His call to obey is not a suggestion but a command. We shouldn't make Jesus any harsher than He appears, but neither should we apologize for His authority and rule.