

Faith of a Canaanite

Devotional Reading: Psalm 61
Background Scripture: Matthew 15:21–28

Matthew 15:21–28

21 Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.

22 And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.

23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.

24 But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

25 Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.

26 But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.

27 And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

Key Text

Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.—Matthew 15:28

Examining Our Faith

Unit II: The Measure of Faith

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman.
2. Explain Jesus' response in verse 24.
3. Brainstorm situations where a parent should and should not intervene on behalf of a child.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Blessing an "Outsider"
- B. Lesson Context

I. First Request (Matthew 15:21–24)

- A. Woman's Mission (vv. 21–22)
A Mother's Care
- B. Jesus' Mission (vv. 23–24)

II. Second Request (Matthew 15:25–28)

- A. Great Need (v. 25)
- B. Greater Priority (vv. 26–27)
- C. Great Faith (v. 28)
No Surprises Here

Conclusion

- A. Great Faith for God's People
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

BethsaidaBeth-say-uh-duh.

CanaaniteKay-nu-nite.

CapernaumKuh-per-nay-um.

centurionsen-ture-ee-un.

ChorazinKo-ray-zin.

Deuteronomy *Due-ter-ahn-uh-me*.

Mediterranean *Med-uh-tuh-ray-nee-un*.

omniscient *ahm-nish-unt*.

Phoenicians *Fuh-nish-unz*.

Syrophenician *Sigh-roe-fih-nish-un*.

Zarephath *Zair-uh-fath*.

Introduction

A. Blessing an “Outsider”

The Rain Gutter Regatta was one of the highlights of my time in Cub Scouts. Competitors built tiny sailboats small enough to be placed in a rain gutter. These boats were human-powered by our blowing on the sails. Competitors risked blowing too hard or at the wrong angle lest they face disqualification.

One year, another boy showed up to the regatta with an unfinished boat that was barely “seaworthy.” It hardly floated, and the boy was upset. My dad noticed the boy’s frustration and offered to help him fix his boat into a more appropriate vessel. After a few minutes of work, my dad turned the barely “seaworthy” vessel into a regatta-winning craft. It even beat my boat in the process.

My dad blessed that boy with generosity. I had difficulty, however, accepting my dad’s actions. I was upset because he had helped a boy I barely knew—a boy I considered an “outsider” to our family.

As you read today’s lesson, consider which character in the story with whom you most identify. Do you align with the (outsider) woman or the (insider) disciples? Either option will affect how you view God’s gracious and generous blessings.

B. Lesson Context

The Gospel of Matthew does not explicitly identify its author. The early church, however, attributed authorship to Matthew, a tax collector who became one of the apostles (Matthew 9:9; 10:3). Other Gospels mention this person by his given name: Levi (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27–28), named after one of the sons of Jacob (see Genesis 29:34; 35:23).

As a tax collector, Matthew worked with the foreign occupiers of Palestine: the Romans. During the first century AD, tax collectors (also known as *publicans*) were despised by their fellow countrymen (example: Luke 18:11). They were seen as traitors to

the Jewish people because they assisted the Romans in taking tax money. They were also held in low regard because they frequently enriched themselves at the expense of others (example: 19:2, 8).

The only other information we have about this apostle is that he was the “son of Alphaeus” (Mark 2:14). The apostle James was also the “son of Alphaeus” (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15). These two may have been brothers, but none of the Gospels make that relationship apparent like they do with other sets of brothers (Matthew 4:21; 10:2; Mark 1:19).

Matthew’s Gospel contains the most quotations from the Old Testament of the four Gospels. The Gospel of Matthew has about 65 Old Testament quotes; Mark has about 30; Luke has about 26, and John has about 16. As such, students frequently call Matthew the “most Jewish” of the four Gospels. It is thought that Matthew intended his Gospel to be received by a primarily Jewish audience.

Although this Gospel emphasized the Jewish context of Jesus’s ministry (see Matthew 10:6; 15:24), its message reveals that the gospel of Jesus Christ was intended for both Jew and Gentile. Matthew is the only Gospel to record the visit of the Gentile wise men (2:1–12). It is also the only one to include Jesus’ commission to His disciples that they “teach all nations” (28:16–20).

The events leading to today’s Scripture reveal the intended expansion of the gospel message. As Jesus’ ministry in Galilee drew to a close, it became evident that His people would reject Him and His mission (see Matthew 13:53–58). His disciples displayed little faith regarding His identity (see 14:22–32). They also failed to understand His teaching (15:12–20). Even the religious leaders were offended by Jesus’ message (15:1–9). The people most expected to accept Jesus and His mission failed to understand. Mark 7:24–30 is a parallel account of Matthew 15:21–28.

I. First Request (Matthew 15:21–24)

A. Woman’s Mission (vv. 21–22)

21. Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.

This verse is not the first time Matthew’s Gospel states that Jesus *went* from one area to another (compare Matthew 4:12; 12:15; 14:13). After He confronted the religious leaders (15:1–9), He *departed* from their midst.

Jesus frequently withdrew from crowds of people so that He could pray in solitude (examples: Matthew 14:23; Luke 5:16). He also removed himself from those who might misunderstand His ministry (example: John 6:15).

Tyre and Sidon were two prominent cities located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea north of Galilee, in the region that is modern-day Lebanon. Following the exodus, much of the area was designated for the tribe of Asher (Joshua 19:24–31). But that tribe didn’t drive out the inhabitants as directed (Judges 1:31–32). Tyre was about 125 miles

north of Jerusalem, with Sidon being an additional 25 miles farther. The cities are mentioned together as “Tyre and Sidon” about 30 times in the Bible.

Because of their access to maritime trade, the cities attained great wealth—especially Tyre (also called “Tyrus”; see Zechariah 9:3). However, their prideful leaders had acted unjustly (see Ezekiel 26–28). As a result, the Old Testament prophets strongly condemned the cities (examples: Isaiah 23:1–18; Joel 3:4; Amos 1:9–10).

Jesus mentioned these cities in His indictment of the Jewish towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matthew 11:20–24; Luke 10:13–14). His contrast to the Gentile cities was to make a lesser-to-greater argument. If Gentile cities would have repented from sin and thereby avoided judgment, how much more should the Jewish towns do the same?

The Law of Moses taught the Israelites to avoid following the pagan practices of other people groups (Leviticus 18:3). By withdrawing into the *coasts* near those cities, Jesus ensured that no Jewish person would follow Him into a Gentile region.

Centuries before, this region was the location of two events involving the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 17:7–24). While in the town of Zarephath, that prophet demonstrated God’s provision for a widow and resurrected the son of another woman. Perhaps the author Matthew had this story in mind as he wrote his account of the events that occurred to Jesus and His followers.

What Do You Think?

How do you decide whether or not to withdraw from a situation for your own spiritual, physical, or emotional health?

Digging Deeper

How might the example of Jesus help inform your decision?

22a. And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him.

The crowds that followed Jesus included people from the region of Tyre and Sidon (see Mark 3:7–8). This *woman* undoubtedly had heard of Jesus and His work because of His popularity, as evidenced by those crowds.

Matthew describes her as being *of Canaan*, but Mark is more specific, noting that “the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician” (Mark 7:26). The Canaanites were an ancient people who had settled in Palestine before the arrival of the Israelites (see Exodus 3:8). During the time of the ancient Israelites, the Canaanites were considered the enemies of Israel (example: Deuteronomy 7:1–6). Their descendants became the Phoenicians—people living in the regions of Tyre and Sidon. This woman was certainly not of Jewish heritage, and her ethnic background would have been seen in a negative light by most first-century Jewish people (compare Acts 10:28).

Mark’s Gospel provides other details not given by Matthew. Mark states that Jesus “entered into an house” (Mark 7:24). This house was likely not the woman’s (compare 7:30). That Gospel also reveals that Jesus had intended for His presence in that region to be a secret, but “he could not be hid” (7:24). The fact that Jesus desired secrecy reveals

that He did not initially intend for His journey into Gentile territory to be a teaching mission.

22b. Saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.

The form of the designation *Son of David* appears 17 times in the Gospels. Matthew's Gospel contains 10 of those instances. In 1 of those 10, the reference is to Joseph (Matthew 1:20); in the other 9, people use that title about the Messiah (here and 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15; 22:42). Jesus never directly applied the designation to himself, but He did so indirectly (22:42; Mark 12:35; Luke 20:41).

The designation comes from the hope that a descendant of Israel's King David would someday rule with peace and justice (see 2 Samuel 7:12–16; Isaiah 9:6–7; Jeremiah 23:5–6; Ezekiel 34:23; compare Psalm 110). During the time between the Old and New Testaments, the Jewish people had strong expectations of this individual. They hoped the Son of David would come as a political leader to cleanse Jerusalem (see the nonbiblical Psalms of Solomon 17:22–28).

Because this designation reflected a uniquely Jewish expectation, it is shocking that a Gentile woman used it about Jesus. She would have been the most unexpected person to recognize Jesus as the long-awaited descendant of David. Before this event, some people had questioned whether Jesus was the Son of David (Matthew 12:23). This woman spoke in a way that reflected her genuine belief about Jesus' identity and mission.

The woman's cry for *mercy* resulted from seeing her daughter suffer demon possession. The New Testament writers understand devils and unclean (evil) spirits as the same thing (examples: Luke 8:2, 29). Neither Matthew nor Mark describes the daughter's symptoms. Others who experienced demonic possession also experienced physical disorders (examples: Matthew 9:32; 12:22). Therefore, we can assume that the daughter suffered similarly.

The way that Matthew's Gospel presents the woman's request is notable. She did not explicitly ask Jesus to heal her *daughter*, thus freeing the daughter from demonic possession (contrast Mark 7:26). Instead, the mother desired to experience *mercy* herself. She was likely her daughter's primary caretaker, and the weight of that work had become an unbearable burden.

What Do You Think?

What steps can we take to increase our faith in God before we see Him act?

Digging Deeper

How do cautionary admonishments, such as that of Luke 12:22–23, help inform your answer?

A Mother's Care

My mother was the most influential woman in my life. As a single parent, she was solely responsible for caring for my sibling and me. She worked hard to give us the best

life possible. She began a new business, formed new relationships, and adopted new habits to care for us.

We know very little about the caring mother in today's lesson text. But caring for her daughter had taken its toll on the mother. By reaching out to Jesus, the mother displayed the extent that she was willing to go for the good of her daughter.

Who went to great lengths to care for you as a child? Maybe that person was your mother. Or perhaps that person was your father, an extended family member, or someone else altogether. Regardless of who that earthly caretaker was, remember God is the ultimate source of care: "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you" (Isaiah 66:13). What prevents you from accepting God's care or being an agent of it to another?

—O. P.

B. Jesus' Mission (vv. 23–24)

23a. But he answered her not a word.

Jesus' refusal to answer the woman might seem cruel, but His silence reflects some cultural differences of His day. At that time, it would be considered inappropriate for a Jewish rabbi to answer a woman—and a Gentile woman, no less (compare John 4:9)!

His silence could also be considered a test of the strength and quality of the woman's faith. Jewish teachers and rabbis sometimes tested their students, and Jesus was no exception (examples: John 5:6; 6:6). The strategic silence created space for the woman to continue talking and explaining her desires.

23b. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.

The woman had become a nuisance to Jesus' *disciples*. They did not address whether they thought Jesus should grant her request. Instead, the disciples wanted the woman out of their midst. Did they not think she was worthy of Jesus' aid because she was a Gentile woman? Or was it how *she crieth after* them that led to their dismissive attitude? Either way, the disciples tended to want to dismiss people they considered annoying or distracting (compare Matthew 19:13).

24. But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Jesus did not send the woman away as His disciples requested. The text is unclear regarding whom He *answered*. If His answer was directed at the disciples, He was reminding them about the mission for which His heavenly Father had *sent* Him (Matthew 10:5–6).

Jesus' primary mission before His resurrection focused on *the house of Israel*. They were like *lost sheep* without a shepherd (examples: Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; Ezekiel 34:5–6; Zechariah 10:2; Matthew 9:36). As a result, Jesus came as a shepherd for the

people. He provided spiritual care and guidance, like a shepherd caring for sheep (see Ezekiel 34:23; Luke 15:1–7; John 10:1–18, 27–30).

Central to Jesus' mission as a shepherd was His preaching on the need for repentance and the presence of God's kingdom (Matthew 4:17). This mission was first revealed to the people of Israel. God's blessing would be offered first to them. Then through them would blessing be available to all peoples (see Genesis 12:1–3; Isaiah 42:1–7; 49:6–7).

To be clear, Matthew's Gospel is not conveying an anti-Gentile sentiment. Old Testament prophets proclaimed that the Messiah's mission would include Gentiles (examples: Isaiah 19:16–25; Hosea 2:23; Zechariah 14:16). With a few exceptions (example: Matthew 8:5–13), Jesus' earthly ministry focused on the people of Israel. He acknowledged that His mission would reach Gentiles (see 24:14; 25:31–33; 28:19–20).

II. Second Request (Matthew 15:25–28)

A. Great Need (v. 25)

25. Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.

The woman did not debate Jesus on the direction of His mission. Instead, she sought relief in a way that could only come from a desperate mother.

B. Greater Priority (vv. 26–27)

26. But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.

Jesus responded with a metaphor to the woman's request for help. The statement highlights that the *bread* is given to the children of the household first and foremost. It is inappropriate for sustenance to be handed out *to dogs* when it would deprive the children. Most of Scripture's references to dogs carry a negative meaning (examples: 2 Samuel 9:8; Philippians 3:2). Unlike today's house pets, dogs in biblical times were scavengers (examples: Exodus 22:31; 1 Kings 14:11).

When we read this text today, we might feel that Jesus spoke harshly to the Gentile woman by comparing her people to dogs. But a study of the verses that follow may cause us to conclude otherwise.

In this statement, Jesus highlighted expectations regarding the order of the mission of God. Some Jewish people considered that the Messiah's mission came first and foremost for the people of Israel. Therefore it would have been inappropriate for Jesus to do anything concerning this Gentile woman.

27. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

The Gentile woman accepted that Jesus was sent to Israel (Matthew 15:24, above). But she did not accept that He was *exclusively* sent to Israel, and she did not take Jesus'

answer as a *no*. Instead, she built on His words, pointing out that *the dogs* did not have to take food from children in order to receive the blessing of *the crumbs*.

What Do You Think?

What metaphors or analogies might we use to help someone understand the depth of God's grace and mercy?

Digging Deeper

What are some dangers of using these comparisons?

C. Great Faith (v. 28)

28a. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith.

Rarely do we read in Matthew's Gospel of instances when *Jesus* publicly commended someone for their faith (see Matthew 9:22, 29). More often, Jesus challenged people for their lack of faith (examples: 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). It is two Gentiles—this woman and a Roman centurion (8:10; Luke 7:9 [see lesson 7])—whom Jesus proclaims to have exceptional *faith*.

We should not interpret the designation of *woman* to be one of harshness. It could be used as a term of endearment (example: John 19:26).

What Do You Think?

How will you exhibit great and persistent faith in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to address possible roadblocks that challenge your faith?

No Surprises Here

In 2021, I was hired as a university professor to help mentor and teach Latino and Hispanic students. These groups had increased in number at my university. Therefore, the administration felt it was appropriate to have a faculty member who could focus on their needs. I developed a plan that I thought would best reach these students. One of the first tasks was to create a course to educate all students regarding the cultures, religions, and histories of Latino and Hispanic peoples.

Student conversations soon went beyond the classroom. Even in my wildest dreams, I could have never planned for the students' positive response to the course. What I had designed to help *some* students soon turned into a way for *all* students to grow. I was caught unaware by the results and remain hopeful for the welfare and growth of my students!

Jesus, however, is never caught unaware. He is all-knowing (omniscient). He was not caught unaware when the Gentile woman approached Him and asked for mercy. He was not caught unaware when His disciples wanted to send her away. And He was not caught unaware when the Gentile woman demonstrated great faith. He is never unaware of our concerns—He knows them before we do! Do you have a great faith willing to bring your cares to Jesus? —O. P.

28b. Be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

There is another parallel point between this story and Jesus' healing of the Roman centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5–13. In both instances, the healing occurred from a distance. The woman's *daughter was made whole*, and the centurion's servant was healed (Matthew 8:13) without Jesus being in the immediate proximity of the ailing person.

Those two occasions and Jesus' healing of the son of a certain nobleman in John 4:46–54 are the only times in the Gospels when a distance healing occurred. Further, all three instances may each describe the healing of a Gentile. As such, these accounts prefigure the apostles' ministry to the Gentiles described in Acts 13:14–52; 17:1–4, 12; etc.

Conclusion

A. Great Faith for God's People

The woman in today's text was the ultimate "outsider" to a first-century Jewish audience. She was aware of the biases against her. The deck would be stacked against her if she approached a Jewish teacher. Despite that awareness, she came to Jesus anyway. Her desperate situation and her suffering daughter necessitated a bold response.

The woman's behavior revealed a persistent and great faith. As a result, she received mercy from the Son of David. She was considered an "outsider" to some people, but she was an "insider" because of her life of faith.

This Scripture invites us to desire a life of great faith. What blessings do we fail to receive because we limit or misplace our faith? A life of great faith requires steadfast confidence that God will show mercy to everyone. How does your perspective need to change in this regard?

What Do You Think?

Considering this quarter's title, "Examining Our Faith," what's the most important thing you can do to complete a self-examination of your faith?

Digging Deeper

Who will you recruit as an accountability partner to help with that examination?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are grateful to be part of Your family. Reveal to us the things that prevent us from having great faith. Encourage us when we feel unable to show persistent faith. Give us eyes to see people we consider "outsiders" so we can invite them to experience Your great mercy. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Live by great faith!