

The Canaanite

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[0 : 00] I was reading an article the other day. It was a list of mothers who have been willing to do anything to save their children.

And there were stories of moms who had fought off mountain lions and bears, and in one case in India, a tiger with their bare hands to save their children.

There was a story of a mom running into a burning house and grabbing up her child and running out as the house was collapsing. And then there was even that famous story from the 80s about a mom who lifted an SUV off the ground so that her child who was trapped underneath could escape.

It was very inspiring to see how these parents are willing to do anything, risk anything, for the sake of their kids. I know we have some older kids in the congregation. If you're here, kids, we're so glad that you're here.

I think you're here with us through the beginning of September. We're giving you a picture every week to draw, so this might be good artistic inspiration for you to imagine your mom or your dad or both as a superhero.

[1 : 18] What would they look like? You can draw that picture as we get into this text. Mom or dad, if you want to do a whole superhero family, hey, you're the artist.

But as I was thinking about these parents, these moms who have risked everything for their kids, I thought about this woman.

The woman in Matthew 15, who I think deserves a place on that list. This, as we shall see later, Matthew describes her as this Canaanite woman, is willing to risk breaking every social taboo, is willing to risk making an absolute fool of herself, because she is desperate to save her daughter who is oppressed by a demon.

And what we actually will end up seeing is that this woman is not just worth paying attention to because of her devotion to her daughter, but she actually becomes one of the greatest examples in Scripture for us to follow as people who seek to follow and know Jesus as our Lord.

But fair warning, this is a challenging passage. It's challenging to understand it. There are things about it that make the meaning, the true meaning, very obscure.

[2 : 36] We know, as we look at the lectionary readings that we've heard read, that there is this theme of people like this woman being included in to God's covenant, and yet Jesus' behavior here seems bizarre, seems to run against that.

So what we're going to do is take an approach to this and operate kind of like detectives to try to figure out what it's saying, and we're going to do that together. So we're going to look at what is this saying, what does it mean, and then what does it mean for us.

We'll draw out some implications for ourselves. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that even when it's hard to understand, even when the true meaning seems to elude us, we know that you are always speaking words that we need to hear.

You're always giving us far more than ideas. As Jesus says, this is actual nourishment for our souls. We need this in order to live. And we thank you that your words always come from a place of love, that they always build up, and that when you send your word out, it never returns void.

It always accomplishes that which you set out for it to accomplish. And so we pray, Lord, in faith that you will make your word plain to us, that we will be nourished by it. In Jesus' name we pray.

[3 : 54] Amen. So first of all, what does it say? Let's just summarize the events of this passage so we know what's going on here. Matthew tells us that Jesus is withdrawn to Tyre and Sidon, and he says a Canaanite woman comes and says, Have mercy on me, O Lord, son of David.

My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon. Now just that right there, there's so much that we could look at. We'll come back to it. At first, interestingly, Jesus doesn't say anything.

It's just sort of a stoic silence. His disciples then think that this means that he's bothered by this woman or that he's trying to focus on something else.

And so he tried to help out by saying, Lord, just send her away. Just tell her to leave. We're not here for her. We're not here for people like her. Then Jesus says, I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.

But this doesn't deter this woman. She persists. She begs. Then Jesus says something. I think most of us would agree is fairly shocking. It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

[5 : 04] The Jews often referred to Gentiles as dogs. It was a derogatory term. And as shocking as this statement is, the woman's response is even more surprising.

She says, yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. And then Jesus seems to pull this 180 and he exclaims, oh, woman, great is your faith.

Be it done for you as you desire. And then her daughter is healed instantly. So what do we make of this encounter? Jesus' behavior, frankly, seems bizarre.

It's not at all what we would expect when we think about Jesus' love and desire to include and welcome the outcast. What in the world is going on here? It's as though he's having maybe just a really bad day.

And he even seems to use a racial slur. And then, as I said a moment ago, he seems to pull a complete 180. His attitude completely reverses.

[6 : 04] And then he praises this woman's faith. One of the translations says, in a more colloquial translation, says, instead of, oh, woman, what an amazing answer.

Right? So he's genuinely thrilled with her response to him. And then he heals her daughter. So what do we make of this? Okay, what does this mean? As I said, this passage is a kind of mystery.

And there are clues all over the place that help us understand what's really going on here. But you have to look for them. So you have to think like a detective. And you have to put all the clues together.

So let's look at sort of three kinds of clues. The first kind of clue would be stylistic clues. By the way, this is an approach that you can use any time you're reading a passage of Scripture.

And you're not sure what it says or what it means. You can use an approach like this. First, let's look at the style. Matthew's style as a gospel writer is very subversive.

[7 : 00] In other words, he is continually challenging, undermining, and ultimately overturning many of the established norms of first century Jewish society.

And he writes these accounts in a way that sets up the audience to expect one thing. And then he delivers a punchline that subverts those expectations.

So you may remember the riddle. It's been around for a few decades now. Maybe you've heard the riddle where somebody says a father and son are in a car crash.

The father doesn't make it. The son is rushed to the hospital. He's rushed into surgery. And just as he's about to go under the knife, the surgeon says, I can't operate. This boy is my son.

How is that possible? Right? And, of course, the answer is the surgeon is the boy's mother. Right? But what this does is it exposes people who can't answer this.

[7 : 58] It exposes our kind of bias, our assumption that the surgeon must be a man. Right? So the riddle is designed to actually expose us as the audience and to make us aware of our faulty assumptions about how things work.

That's the kind of device we see happening here. There's a setup that activates certain expectations and then a punchline that subverts those expectations. And what this does is it exposes our faulty assumptions.

The joke is on us as the readers. So that's the first clue. We know stylistically this kind of thing happens in the Gospels and in Matthew. And so we're going to hold on to that as our first clue.

Now we're going to look at a second kind of clue, which is context. Anytime you're looking at a passage and it's hard to understand, look at what comes before it. Look at what comes after it.

See how it fits together. Matthew writes his gospel thematically, meaning he groups things together because he wants us to read them all together because there are larger points that he's trying to make.

[9 : 06] So just before this encounter, Jesus is confronting the self-righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. And when he does that, he quotes an Old Testament passage, Isaiah 29.

And in case you don't remember what Isaiah 29 is all about, this is where God denounces Israel for their empty religiosity. And then God says, one day I'm going to restore you.

And this is how you know I'm going to restore you because I will cause Lebanon to flourish.

Lebanon is Gentile territory, right? I'm going to, I'm going to, your hardness of heart and hypocrisy is a barrier between us.

One day I'm going to restore you. I'm going to bring you back into the fold. And the sign that that's going to happen is I'm going to cause the Gentiles in Lebanon to flourish while you wither.

And that will be the sign for you, right? So where does this whole encounter with this woman take place? It says the district of Tyre and Sidon. Well, where's that?

[10:14] Lebanon. Right? So we're in Lebanon right now. And then immediately after this encounter, Jesus goes and he begins to heal large numbers of Gentiles.

And then he miraculously feeds thousands of them with just a few loaves of bread, showing that God plans to give the Gentiles far more than crumbs from the table.

He plans to bless them abundantly. It's a miracle of a feeding of thousands of people that parallels an earlier miracle in Matthew's gospel where Jesus performed this and miraculously fed Jews.

Now it's happening to Gentiles and it's a contextual way of saying God's blessing is for everybody.

Right? So that's the context. And so if we look at that before and we look at after and we keep in mind, here's the next clue.

We need to read this whole encounter with Isaiah 29 in mind and God's promise to make Lebanon flourish in order to bring the Jews to repentance. It's like, okay, well, now that's going on.

[11:16] Let's hold that in our minds. And the third and final kind of clue to the meaning of this is the actual language in the passage. The fact that Matthew refers to this woman as a Canaanite is really significant because at this point in history, the word Canaanite had been not in use for hundreds of years.

It's a very antiquated term. This would be like you meeting somebody who's from the UK and calling them an Anglo-Saxon. Right? It just is, you just typically are not going to say that.

Right? British person, yeah, but Anglo-Saxon, a little outdated. That's what's going on here. It's a very outdated term. Why is Matthew using this term?

This woman is technically Syrophenician. The parallel account of this in Mark tells us that she's Syrophenician. Why would Matthew call her a Canaanite? Well, it's very deliberate.

The Canaanites in the Old Testament were the ultimate enemies of God and his people. If anybody stood opposed to the covenant, if anybody was labeled as the ultimate enemy of God and his people, it was the Canaanites.

[12:19] Very, very, very deep history of animosity between these people groups. And so Matthew wants to portray this woman as the ultimate outsider, the outsider's outsider.

You can't get further away from God's blessings than a person like this. Also, so that's the first term linguistic clue that there's more going on here that Matthew's trying to get across.

Also, another linguistic clue, even though it seems like Jesus is calling this woman a dog, in reality what's happening is that he's responding like he often does with a parable.

This is kind of a mini parable. The word dog here is not the derogatory word used by the Jews to insult Gentiles. It's a diminutive form of that word that means something more like puppy, like a little puppy, a household pet.

So Jesus is saying to this woman, hey, there's an order in which I am bringing God's blessing to the world. And the order has been established that first it would come to the Jews and then the Gentiles.

[13:25] The Old Testament is, you know, full of that kind of teaching that this is how God's blessing is going to come. He says there's an order that needs to be maintained. It's not right to do things out of order.

And yet even still, we know based on the context that we've looked at that Jesus has deliberately come into Gentile territory to do just that, what Isaiah 29 says.

Right? So the tone based on all of this, the tone of this exchange, which we can't get from just reading it, is almost certainly a playful tone. You might even imagine Jesus kind of smiling slightly as he says it.

There's a device that master teachers, wise teachers will sometimes use where they deliberately play. They deliberately play kind of a devil's advocate role.

And they create a foil against which their student can build their argument. Right? So they create a kind of false resistance. And it gives the student the opportunity to mount their response.

[14:30] And that, I believe, is what Jesus is doing here. So with all of these observations in mind about style and context and language, we can take another pass at this.

And I think we begin to see this encounter in a whole new way. So imagine we are first century Jewish readers with all of the assumptions and prejudices and bias that we would have in that context.

Here's the setup. A respected Jewish rabbi finds himself in the god-awful region of Tyre and Sidon. It's a horrible place.

A Canaanite woman, the very worst kind of person, has the audacity to think that God might do something to help her daughter. This rabbi says what any self-respecting rabbi would say.

God's blessings are reserved for his children, not for dogs like you. And just as we are beginning to nod to ourselves with smug superiority, then comes the punchline.

[15:36] This woman turns the parable around on Jesus. The only time this ever happens anywhere in the Scriptures. She reverses it.

It's like an Akito flip. Reverses the momentum of the parable. Turns it right back on Jesus. And says, yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

Notice she's including herself as one for whom Jesus is the master. Right? And Jesus exclaims, what an amazing answer. Great is your faith.

Very rarely does Jesus praise the faith of anyone. Great is your faith. And heals her daughter. And then we realize the joke is on us as the reader.

The ultimate outsider, this Canaanite dog, is actually held up as an example to both the Pharisees and the disciples. Right?

[16:35] She calls Jesus the son of David, which is a Jewish messianic title. She's not Jewish, but she understands and has connected the dots and understands who Jesus is in a way that none of the Jews do.

Her humility juxtaposes with the Pharisees' self-righteousness earlier in chapter 15. And while the disciples are still not yet even to understand Jesus' parables, that happens also earlier in this chapter.

Jesus laments, you still don't understand? You still can't see through the parables? While they're not even able to understand the parables, she not only understands it, but turns it back on Jesus. And then you have Jesus lamenting the little faith of the disciples in chapters 14 and 16 and praising this woman as a woman of great faith.

So what we see here, what's actually happening in this story in a very subversive way, is that this Canaanite woman is being held up as a model of Christian faithfulness.

[17:39] One commentator calls her the, quote, the catalyst, the foremother of all Gentile Christians. We sometimes talk about Mary as being the first disciple, Jesus' mother Mary, because of the way she responds to the angel.

If she's the first disciple, or if Mary Magdalene, who encounters Jesus after the resurrection, some call her the first Christian.

Well, this woman is the foremother of all Gentile Christians. So now that we've begun to understand what's really going on in this text, what does this mean for us?

This woman is one of the finest examples of how we should approach God anywhere in the Bible. She's one of the finest examples of how we should approach God anywhere in the Bible.

You know, some people believe, maybe they wouldn't admit this, but some people deep down believe that God is maybe kind of distant or inaccessible.

[18:46] Some people believe, if you really get into it, that God maybe is somehow always vaguely disappointed in us for not doing better. That God has this sense of, man, I just keep putting up with you, but you just, you keep letting me down.

Other people, I think, maybe believe the opposite. They think of God as this always accessible, almost like a spiritual force, right?

A lot of people like to talk about the universe, where we can send out our kind of vibes, and then the universe will respond to us in kind.

And we can essentially access this force whenever we want to, you know, kind of like a cosmic vending machine. People have lots of different ideas about God and what it means to approach

God.

The thing that stands out most about this woman is that when it comes to approaching God, she has two qualities that you very rarely see together. She is both humble and bold at the same time. [19:52] A bold humility or a humble boldness. Notice that she doesn't even question her place in the parable. She doesn't assert her rights at all, right?

Even in the face of being playfully referred to as a puppy who should wait for the crumbs, she doesn't challenge that. Instead, she says, look, okay, I know there's an order to God's plan. I'm not questioning that. The Savior comes first to the Jews to show that God's promises have been fulfilled. I'm not a Jew. That's fine. But then she says, but I know there's enough at the table for me. I know there's enough for everyone. So she's doing something that we really don't ever see in our society, and I think for most of us, even me, it makes us a bit uncomfortable. She's asserting herself very boldly, but not on the basis of her rights. See, in our society, there's so much focus on our rights.

[20:56] And rights are important in a society like ours. Don't get me wrong. But there could be this sense when we come to God that you should give me what I'm owed.

It is my right to ask this. How dare you not give this to me? And that's not what we see at all with this woman. This woman is coming to Jesus knowing that she deserves nothing.

She knows that she deserves nothing. She's not saying, how dare you? Do you know, you know, I deserve so much more. I know I don't deserve anything, but I know you have enough.

I know you have more than enough. Right? The Pharisees tend to think, and we need to contrast this woman with the Pharisees, they tend to think in terms of merit.

God should give me what I deserve because of my goodness. All the times I go to church, all the volunteer teams that I serve on, all the things that I do in the community, all the issues that I care about and pour myself into, God should bless me because of my goodness.

[21:59] I do good things, therefore. But this woman is coming from a very different place. Not on the basis of merit, but on the basis of mercy.

Right? The merit approach says to God, give me what I deserve because of my goodness. I've done all this for you, now you give me what is owed.

The mercy approach says something very different. Give me what I don't deserve because of your goodness. Give me what I know I don't deserve, not because of my goodness, but because I know you're good, God.

And I know, I know you have abundant, abundant blessings that you want to pour out on your people. Give me what I don't deserve because you're good, because you're merciful.

And that's what we see in this woman, and we so rarely see that today. And as we think about this in our own lives, you know, there are really two ways on display that we can miss out on the mercy and the grace and the love of Jesus on offer through the gospel.

[23:10] Some of us do miss out because of our self-righteousness. You know, we think that because we are enlightened, socially conscious people who try to do the right thing, we tend to say in our hearts when we approach God, God, give me what I deserve because of my goodness.

And I know other people who have the opposite struggle. Because we assume that God is disappointed in us, tired of our whining, that he sees us basically as failures, we tend to say in our hearts, God would never give me anything because of my badness.

Or another way we might say it is, I'm sure God is so tired of hearing me ask for the same thing over and over and over. Or we might think, I don't even know how to pray because it's been 10 years since I really prayed.

Or I've never really prayed. I don't even know what I would say. If you want to know which tendency you have or which tends to be stronger in you, a good litmus test is to look at your prayer life, is to look at what it's like when you approach God.

You know, first question would be, do you pray? If not, why not? Is the reason that you don't pray, is that because you don't really feel like you need anything from God?

[24:30] I mean, a lot of us, you know, if you've got a good job and a few good friends and you're fairly healthy and a good place to live and a lot going on in your life, a lot of times we can go a very long time, it doesn't even really occur to us to pray.

It doesn't really need, the bases are covered in our lives. Or maybe you don't pray because you don't really think God cares about your needs. Maybe you feel like God is, he's involved with the big

stuff.

Yeah, we should pray for the wars, we should pray for the fires, you know, in Hawaii. We should pray for the big things. But, you know, God doesn't care about, you know, whether I get that job or whether or not that person, you know, likes me or whether or not my kids get into that school. That's kind of menial stuff. If you do pray, why do you pray? What motivates you to pray? Is it because you genuinely desire to feel closer to God or is it because you're praying only when you want something?

You know, the Anne Lamott, you know, help, help, help, you know, thank you, thank you, thank you kind of prayer. The signal flare prayer. Or when you pray, is it because you feel like you have to? [25 : 41] You're sort of doing your duty and if you don't pray, you feel really guilty about not praying because you know you should pray because that's what Christians do. When you pray, why do you pray? And then third question, how do you respond when God doesn't give you what you ask for?

How do you respond? Do you get angry? Do you resent the fact that you've spent so much time in prayer, you've given so much of your life and sacrificed so much to be faithful to God?

All you wanted from God was this one thing and he didn't give it to you. Or does that, right, when God doesn't give you what you want, does that just confirm your sense that God really doesn't care about you?

That if God is doing stuff in the world, he's doing it over here, but you're really not on his radar. Spend time reflecting on questions like this in your own life and chances are you will see a mixture of self-righteousness and self-loathing.

You'll see both of these things at work in your heart, keeping you, barring you from really experiencing the love and mercy of God in your life the way this woman does.

[26 : 57] And that's why we need examples to follow like this woman. The example that she sets of humility and boldness. In approaching Jesus, she's humble because she knows she's unclean.

She knows, you know, in fact, we all are. She knows that in the face of God, she has no rights. She knows that Jesus owes her nothing.

She knows that Jesus needs nothing from her. He doesn't care about her approval. He doesn't owe her anything.

All she knows is she needs him to show mercy. And yet, she is also incredibly bold because she knows that there's enough, that God has enough to bless the whole world.

That Jesus' mercy is abundant. And she recognizes ultimately that it's not really about her. It's about Jesus. And as we pray every week, we're going to pray in a little while, when we come to the Lord's table, that when it comes to Jesus, his eternal nature is always to have mercy.

[28 : 09] And that all we need to do is come and ask, Lord, give me what I don't deserve because of your abundant goodness.

Let's pray. Lord, may these be more than ideas for us.

May we, as we come to you in prayer and in our singing and as we gather around your table, may we experience your mercy and your love.

May we feel your delight in us. May you allow us to see clearly the truth of our own hearts. That you would strip away any sense of entitlement that may be barring us from approaching you.

Also, that you would strip away any sense of self-loathing in us, Lord. Self-critique. Help us rightly see that both can bar us from coming and receiving your mercy.

[29 : 24] And fill us with boldness and fill us with humility to come. And to plead with you. To pour your mercy and your grace into our lives through your Holy Spirit.

Because you are good. And your blessings are abundant. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen.