

Faith of a Canaanite Woman

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Preacher: Rev. Robert Krech

[0:00] So there are passages in the Gospels that preachers love to preach, and then there are passages like this one. So a desperate mother comes to Jesus about her tormented child. The situation is bad. The woman's daughter is severely oppressed by a demon and there is no help.

And Jesus, who touched lepers, who wept at a tomb who would not break a bruised reed, does three things in a row that look nothing like the Jesus that we read about in the rest of the Gospels. First, he seemingly ignores her. When she comes to him asking for help, in verse 23 it says, he did not answer her a word. Second, when he does speak, it's not even to her and it sounds like rejection.

He speaks to his disciples who are asking him to make her go away because she was annoying them. And what Jesus says to them, and in her hearing, is, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

And then, to make things seem even worse, when she kneels before him and begs for help, he seems to insult her by comparing her to a dog.

[1:15] So, this is a tough passage. And commentators have struggled with this for about 18 centuries, and today I'm going to lay it all to rest. No, no, I'm just kidding. So, some have tried to soften it by imagining that Jesus is using a figure of speech.

Others have tried to explain it away as Jesus quoting a proverb that he's then trying to overturn cleverly. I even heard a former professor once say that Jesus' comment was typical of the ethnocentrism and even racism among Israelites towards Gentiles at his time.

So, I'm not sure any of these really work for me. But one of the things I love about preaching from the Gospels is the chance to slow down and look closely at Jesus, at what he says and what he does.

For me, nothing that he says or does is accidental. It's always intended to achieve something, to catalyze something that brings his kingdom into the lives and the situation of those around him. And so, just to give you a sense of my direction of travel in all of this, what I think Jesus is doing here is drawing faith out of this woman that brings his kingdom to her and her daughter.

[2:29] So, in order to get there, it helps to unpack some of the layers in this short passage. And so, one of those layers is what we can know about Tyre and Sidon, both historically and in Jesus' time.

And another layer is what we can know about the woman herself. But let's start with what the audience of Matthew's Gospel have in their minds when they heard this story, the history and the present context for Tyre and Sidon.

So, Tyre and Sidon, Phoenician port cities on the Mediterranean coast were roughly 30 to 40 miles northwest of Galilee. They were outside Herod Antipas' jurisdiction, outside Jewish territory, and thoroughly pagan.

This is the furthest north that Jesus ever goes in Matthew's Gospel. He has effectively at this point left Israel, left the covenant land, and in the thinking and beliefs of most Gentiles and Jews of his time, he is now in the territory controlled by other gods.

And so, for any of Matthew's Jewish audience, Tyre and Sidon evoke a couple biblical memories. So, we read in 1 Kings 16.31 that Sidon is Jezebel's hometown.

[3:44] Her father, Ethbaal, was king of the Sidonians, and it was from Sidon that Baal worship was imported into Israel. Not a lot of good associations for many Jews.

As well, Tyre and Sidon stands under some of the fiercest judgments, some of the fiercest prophetic oracles in the Old Testament. Isaiah 23, Ezekiel 26 to 28, Joel 3, just to name a few.

Ezekiel's oracle against the king of Tyre is one of the strongest and harshest prophetic denunciations of human pride in all of Scripture. So, Tyre and Sidon have a reputation. But, it's not the only biblical memory that they would have. In 1 Kings 17, when Israel had abandoned the Lord, God sent Elijah out of Israel to Zarephath, a village between Tyre and Sidon, to a Gentile widow where Elijah restored her child to life.

So, Jesus brings the same story up in Luke 4 in the synagogue in Nazareth when he announces his mission. So, for Jesus to go to Tyre and Sidon, he's both going to a place viewed as entirely outside the authority of the God of Israel, where some of the worst forms of paganism to affect Israel originated.

[5:00] And also, though, a place where God has already gone before through Elijah, also to help a Gentile woman and her child when Israel was not hearing God well. And so, from this perspective, Matthew 15 looks less like an unusual departure from Jesus' ministry and more like an invasion and a pattern for God.

So, keeping this kind of context in mind, let's look briefly at the woman at the center of the story. Matthew and Mark refer to her in different terms. In Mark's telling of the story, he refers to her as a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth.

He identifies her as culturally Hellenized and ethnically Phoenician. Matthew reaches back a thousand years and in verse 22 uses a different word.

He calls her a Canaanite, which is a spiritual identity marker. Canaanite in the Old Testament is a word for the people Israel was commanded to drive out of the land.

It's the word used to identify people who are enemies of God's covenant. I think Matthew chooses it on purpose because he wants his audience to know that she is far outside of the covenant.

[6:10] Far outside of the saving faith in the God of Israel. So, I want to add something else to our reflection on who this woman is. So, what I'm about to say is not anything that Matthew or Mark say in their telling of Jesus' interaction with this woman.

But I think for anyone, for Jesus' disciples and anyone in Jesus' time who would hear this story, they would be well aware of this. So, according to archaeological research, the region of Tyre and Sidon was home to one of the most prominent healing temples in the ancient Near East.

About two miles northeast of Sidon, at a site called Boston Esheikh beside the Lwadi River, was a temple to Eshman. Eshman was a Phoenician god of healing.

And the renewal of life. The chief male deity of Sidon. So, the construction of that temple began in the 7th century BC. And it was in continuous use all over that time, all the way up into Jesus' day. In the Roman times, it was even expanded to become a whole colonnaded street with a fountain for ritual washing. So, this temple and its rituals were well known and still functioning in Jesus' time.

[7:20] And Jesus is there. So, here's something that could be really interesting for this story on a personal level for the woman and her daughter. Archaeologists excavating this temple site recovered dozens of votive statues of children.

Small figures dedicated to Eshman on behalf of sick or vulnerable little ones, along with ritual pools and glass jars thought to be related to these healing rituals.

There was also a second shrine at Kyareb near Tyre with terracotta figures of children as well. So, this was literally a place where Phoenician moms and dads took their sick kids when they needed help.

So, like I said, Matthew's gospel doesn't mention this. Neither that there's this temple near Tyre and Sidon, nor that the woman had been there. So, we can't say for sure that she had gone to these sites.

But I will say this. She lived within a short distance from one of the most famous healing shrines in the region. A temple dedicated to a God with a distinct focus on curing children.

[8:23] This was a nearby spiritual resource available to this woman. Well known, well regarded by everyone around her. Something that would be natural to her cultural and spiritual upbringing.

But in the passage in Matthew that we're reading today, she's not praying at that temple. She's asking Jesus for his help. So, I can't help but wonder, did she go to this nearby temple, didn't get the help she needed, and so she's now coming to Jesus.

We don't know, but it's definitely interesting. But I actually think it gets even more interesting. So, in the passage, the woman comes and says to Jesus, Have mercy on me, O Lord, son of David.

My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon. And I want us to notice two things in what she says. Keeping all this other stuff in mind. She says this. First, the woman asks for mercy and not justice.

The Greek verb is elation. Mercy is by definition what you can't demand. The moment you can demand something as a matter of right or fairness, it's not mercy.

[9 : 29] The woman doesn't come with an argument for why she thinks she deserves help. She has no right to ask Jesus for help, and she knows it. All she has is her raw need, and she simply throws herself on Jesus' compassion.

Second, the woman calls Jesus son of David, which is amazing. She is not Jewish, but she uses a Jewish messianic title from the promises to David.

She has no spiritual, cultural, or ethnic share in David or Israel. But she confesses Jesus as the Messiah. So, quick sidebar in Matthew's gospel.

Son of David is almost always used by people who are asking Jesus for healing. This is the two blind men in chapter 9. The crowds in chapter 12.

Blind Bartimaeus in chapter 20. For Matthew, it's clear that son of David carries an understanding of who and what the Messiah is like. Son of David is someone who heals.

[10 : 29] And the Canaanite woman seems to understand this. So, now we come to the tough parts. In verse 23, I mentioned this already. Jesus says, but he did not answer her a word.

So, this could feel like a very painful response to receive. Is Jesus ignoring her? Then, to add to the hurt, the disciples asked Jesus to make her go away, like I mentioned, because she's a nuisance or an inconvenience.

And then, in response, Jesus says what we read earlier. I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. So, I don't think this is ethnic disdain like one of my professors said in a class. I want to suggest that this is more a statement of redemptive order that Jesus is speaking to his disciples for their information. And Jesus says the same thing to his disciples when he sends them out in Matthew 10.

Paul speaks to this. He says, the gospel is the power of God for salvation to the Jew first and also to the Greek. And in John's gospel, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that salvation is from the Jews.

[11 : 34] The Messiah of Israel came to Israel first. It's true. In fulfillment of God's covenant promises. But he goes to all people. This is not exclusion. It's sequence.

But the point remains. It feels very painful. Jesus seems to ignore her. And then, in the third thing I mentioned, the woman kneels and says to Jesus in verse 25, Lord, help me.

The word used here is actually the Greek word meaning literally to kiss the ground. It's the word that the New Testament uses for worship. The woman is bowing down to Jesus in worship, calling him Lord and asking him to help her.

And Jesus says it's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. Ouch. So, I've heard it preached. I've preached this myself in the past that the word used for dog is canarian. It's a diminutive term. It refers to a little dog or a household pet. It's not the word for a feral dog that wanders the streets. But I don't think it's much better. Honestly, it's still a hard word.

[12 : 38] I'm not trying to criticize Jesus here. But for Matthew's audience, they would have caught this difference. Jesus places the woman not among the children at the table, but not as a mangy dog outside on the street.

But under the table. Proximate to the table. So, let me say again, I think the turn of phrase is a hard one. If he had asked me for advice, I probably would have said, don't go with that one, Jesus.

Here's some suggested wording for this. But this is what he says. What the woman says next is astonishing. In verse 27, she says, She says, So what happened?

Did she wear Jesus down like she seemed to be wearing down the disciples? Did she outmaneuver or kind of outclever Jesus with her reply? Have such a sharp answer that Jesus had to sort of sigh and, you know, silent shoulder shrug and say, Okay, fine.

You get what you want. So, I don't think that's what was happening. I think what's happening here is that Jesus is being very deliberate about how he's ministering to her and her daughter. His silence is not absence.

[14 : 21] His non-answers and hard answers are not denials of her request. Jesus went to Tyre and Sidon on purpose to bring his kingdom to a very pagan place the way God sent Elijah to this

place centuries before.

To bring mercy to a Gentile woman and her dying son. And Jesus is doing the same in Tyre and Sidon. He didn't resist her or her pain or her request for help.

I think his silence and pushback had the effect of sharpening and drawing out her faith. And this was on purpose. We see other stories like this in the Gospels.

In John 4, the royal official comes to Jesus and says, Help me, my son is dying. And Jesus says, Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe. And the man presses Jesus again to help his son instead of being deflected.

Or in Mark 9, when a father asks Jesus to help his son who's also oppressed by a demon, saying, If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us. Jesus replies, If you can, all things are possible for one who believes.

[15 : 27] And the dad says, I believe, help my unbelief. He doesn't get deflected. He pushes in. Even Jesus' mom knew this about him. At the wedding in Cana, she says, We're out of wine.

And he says, Woman. Man, if I said to my mom, Woman? And reply? He says to her, Woman. You know, what does this have to do with you or me? It's not my problem.

And his mom pushes even harder on him. Just seems to ignore it. And says to the servants, Just do whatever he says. Sometimes Jesus seems silent.

He seems to push back on requests in the Gospels. But I think it's to draw out faith that moves mountains. Because he wants to heal. He wants to help. So I want to focus on a couple insights here.

So Jesus' commendation, Great is your faith, Is actually unique. In all of Matthew's Gospel, There are only two times when Jesus says this. Once to the Canaanite woman, And then to a centurion in chapter 8.

[16 : 29] Both are Gentiles. Meanwhile, Jesus calls his own disciples four times, *Oligoi pistoi*, Which means little faiths. Including when they're in the boat with Jesus, Just one chapter earlier.

Jesus isn't trying to insult them. He's trying to push them to have more faith. So Jesus' commendation of the woman Is actually really significant. Partly because of what happened in the previous passage.

Before this passage, Where we read about Jesus and the Canaanite woman, Jesus is fighting with the scribes and Pharisees Over ritual hand washing. They accuse Jesus' disciples of eating with defiled hands.

The conflict ends with Jesus saying something sharp. It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles, But what comes out of the mouth. Because what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart.

These religious leaders, The ones who knew the scriptures, Had clean hands but defiled hearts. Meanwhile, The Canaanite woman, Who's ceremonially unclean, And outside the Jewish faith, Had a heart full of faith. What proceeds out of her mouth Is a confession of faith in Jesus' Messiah.

[17 : 39] What made her faith great Was not the size of her faith. It wasn't her knowledge of the law, The prophets. It's that her faith held on to the goodness of Jesus. She held on to who he is as son of David.

Jesus' apparent silence drew out her faith In order to reveal to her and his disciples And everyone who reads the story What great faith looks like.

And the other thing is she came not just with faith, But with raw need. As I said, She never once justified her request. All she came here was with raw need and faith.

And she said that she would take any crumbs That fell from the table. Those crumbs were enough to heal the woman's daughter. In the passage that follows, Jesus goes on to feed over 4,000 people, Most of whom were Gentile.

It's interesting to me that in this passage, A couple crumbs that helped the woman In the next passage Turned into seven basketfuls left over. What started out as something for her Turned into something for a lot of people In the way Matthew tells it.

[18 : 45] So let me close, Bring this even closer to home. So I want to say something to those of you Who feel like you're an outsider to faith Or maybe that you don't feel like You're a legit Christian. So I want you to see this woman's story And take heart.

Jesus was not her Messiah. This was not her religion. Her upbringing, Her cultural or ethnic heritage. But she came to Jesus anyway. The only criteria that Jesus has Is that you come to him real, Honest with your actual need.

He'll never turn you away. He will grow your faith to help you get there. So all of us, All of those and all of us Who visited other shrines or temples. So we've all been to those shrines That offer peace, Help, Healing.

Could be therapy, Medicine, Surgeries, Alternate approaches, Books. They can all be really helpful And I'm not putting them down. No one should stop seeking healing From those things. But they're not the same as Jesus.

The woman found that Even though the crumbs That fell from the table Were more than all That the shrines and temples Around her could ever offer. So give Jesus a try too. Hear me out.

[19 : 52] I'm not saying This is not an anti-medicine, Anti-doctor message. Just, If you've been pursuing that, Keep doing that. But if you've not been pursuing Jesus too, Add Jesus.

Put it on your list of supplements. Silence. So for those struggling With Jesus' silence, You've prayed for your kids, Your marriage, Your illness, Your job, For all the pains Of those around you, And there's been nothing.

Jesus' silence Is not absence. Jesus seemed to ignore Martha and Mary When they asked him To come help Lazarus. He came eventually And raised the dead. So don't quit asking.

Let Jesus draw out your faith. To those struggling With insurmountable evil, Jesus went to a place With a long and deep history Of paganism And worship of dark spirits.

Jesus went there on purpose, I believe, Just for this woman And her daughter. Nothing was going to keep him From breaking off the darkness That afflicted her Or her daughter. Wherever Jesus went, Darkness had to give way No matter how long it was there, How much everyone gave it place, And no matter how strong A hold it seemed to have.

[21 : 03] Expect Jesus to break The darkness off of you And your life too, No matter what. Last one. This is for me And everyone else Who is considered A faith insider.

Don't miss the context For this story. The scribes and the Pharisees, The faith insiders, Members of the covenant, Chosen people of God, Had the scriptures, The temple, The law, And the clean hands, Argued with Jesus About hand washing, When it was a Canaanite woman Who knew Jesus Was the Messiah who heals.

Familiarity with the bread Is not the same As hunger for it. It's entirely possible That we find ourselves At the table, But we don't eat. So let's examine ourselves Once in a while at least To test and make sure That we're coming to Jesus Raw and real, Asking for more faith And expecting more from Jesus.

Let me pray. Lord Jesus, Thank you That nothing stops you From reaching us. You go anywhere And you chase us, Lord.

Thank you, Lord, That despite the way It can seem sometimes When you seem silent, You are not absent And you are for us. So grow our faith, Lord.

[22 : 23] Grow our hunger. Grow our expectation. And meet us, Lord. Come meet us. We thank you. Amen. Amen.