

**The Canaanite Woman**  
**Matthew 15:21-28**  
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The first half of Matthew 15 centers around the issue of defilement. Jesus addressed this question of what renders someone unclean by telling the Pharisees and scribes, that “*It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man*” (Matthew 15:11). The Pharisees’ view of defilement led them to avoid association with many people, including tax-gatherers (Matthew 18:17), and Samaritans (John 4:9).

It is in this context of His view of defilement that Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman in the district of Tyre and Sidon in Matthew 15:21-28. This account is also found in Mark 7:24-30. It occurs between the feeding of the 5,000 (Matthew 14:13-21) and the feeding of the 4,000 (Matthew 15:32-39), and transitions the gospel from being focused on the nation of Israel, to expanding from the Jews to the Gentiles.

**The place of ministry (15:21)**

The district of Tyre and Sidon was along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, in the land of ancient Phoenicia and in modern day Lebanon. Tyre was about 34 miles northwest of Gennesaret, where Jesus left from (cf. Matthew 14:34). Sidon was another 24 miles north of Tyre. This was in completely Gentile territory and it is apparent that He actually entered into the region of Tyre from Mark 7:31 and not to the border of it. It is likely that the disciples would have never been to such a completely Gentile territory ever before. This is the only time Jesus left the area of Palestine.

Jesus “withdrew” to this area, which is the fourth time we find Him withdrawing in Matthew (cf. 4:12; 12:15; 14:13). Mark 7:24 informs us that “*He had entered a house*” because “*He wanted no one to know of it; yet He could not escape notice.*” Therefore, He traveled to this region to spend time with His disciples away from the growing threat from the religious leaders.

In His attempt to defuse the conflict with the scribes and Pharisees in order to continue His work of training the disciples, Jesus departed to an area populated by unclean Gentiles. This was the application of what He had been teaching the scribes and Pharisees about the nature of defilement. One is defiled by what they think, say and do, rather than anything that comes to them.

Earlier, Jesus had warned the Israelites about their coming judgment by using Tyre and Sidon in comparison with them. *“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you”* (Matthew 11:21-22).

### **The plea of the woman (15:22)**

The Canaanite woman came to Jesus in this area. She had heard of His arrival (Mark 7:25), known of His ability to heal, and sought Him out to heal her demon-possessed daughter. She was aware of Jesus from others from the land of Tyre and Sidon who had experienced His ministry earlier, *“Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place; and there was a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured”* (Luke 6:17-18).

Matthew begins the introduction to this Canaanite woman with the phrase “behold” (well translated by the ESV). This calls our attention to this dramatic narrative between Jesus and this woman. While Mark refers to her Syrophenician race, Matthew calls her a Canaanite. 2 Samuel 24:7 links Tyre with the land of the Canaanites. The Phoenicians descended from the Canaanites and Matthew uses the history term to remind the reader that this woman was of the lineage of Israel’s enemies. Her ancestry and her location in the land of the Canaanites were related to idolatry.

This woman approached Jesus to cry out with the words, *“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.”* This “cry” had a strong emotional tone, seemingly in desperation, for mercy. She requests mercy “on me,” even though it is her daughter who is demon-possessed. Her daughter’s affliction had dramatically affected her as well.

While her use of the term “Lord” to address Jesus was often used as a common term for respect, there is a certain spiritual understanding that her use of the phrase “Son of David” communicates. This was not only a uniquely Jewish term referencing the descendant of King David, it had Messianic overtones. She certainly understood the concept of the Messianic hopes of the Jewish people. Historically, Hiram, the King of Tyre during the time of David and Solomon, was a friend of David (1 Kings 5:1).

Since the woman certainly knew of Israel's promised Messiah, how did she learn of the term "*Son of David?*" As noted, Luke 6:17-18 described people from Tyre and Sidon as being among those who came to hear Jesus and be healed by Him. The crowds would be amazed, would say, "*This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?*" (Matthew 12:23). So the sense that Jesus was at least potentially the Son of David was widespread.

She also is described in this account as being very spiritually minded. She not only chose to come to Jesus to plead on behalf of her daughter, she understood the place of her people in relation to the Jews in the plan of God. Her spiritual insight moved her to exalt Jesus as the Son of David.

Unlike Mark, Matthew includes her words to Jesus to emphasize her significant understanding of Jesus as the Messiah. She stands in sharp contrast to the scribes and Pharisees who opposed Him. Matthew, more than any other New Testament book, highlights the title "Son of David," using it ten times, or more than the rest of the New Testament, and Matthew 1:1-17 centers the genealogy of Jesus around David. This is because Matthew writes to a Jewish audience.

The daughter's affliction is described with an intensifier "*cruelly demon-possessed.*" Mark 7:25 describes the daughter with a diminutive term, translated "*little daughter.*" This then describes the daughter as being a child, rather than an adult. It is important to note that neither the woman, nor the daughter, nor any other demon-possessed person in the Scripture, is described as causing the demon-possession. Rather, the Scripture describes a demon-possessed person as afflicted, and associates it with diseases.

### **The passivity of Jesus (15:23a)**

It is remarkable that Jesus did not respond to her plea at all. This is uniquely different from other cases in the Scripture. This has led many to wonder why He chose to be reticent. Certainly, He did so for a reason, and we can rule out that He was being rude. The typical explanation is that Jesus did this to either test or to build the woman's faith.

However, the immediate inclusion of the disciples' objection points to a reason beyond only the woman. The disciples had been led by Jesus to a pagan territory to learn about the Lord's mission to the world. Jesus knew of her faith and His silence revealed the depth of her faith, in light of the little faith of the disciples and the complete lack of faith among His religious opponents. She was an example.

### **The petition by the disciples' (15:23b)**

The disciples immediately demonstrated their lack of concern for the needs of the Gentiles. They implored Jesus to “*send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.*” While this further describes the intensity of her plea, yet she never addressed the disciples, but only Jesus. She saw Jesus as being the source of potential healing for her daughter, not the disciples.

There are two possible understandings of the disciples' words. “*Send her away*” could mean either “*dismiss her*” or “*set her free.*” Their desire to end her shouting would be met with either interpretation. The translation “*send her away*” (NASB, ESV, NIV) has the sense of dismissal, and is supported by the more common meaning of the Greek verb (APOLYSON).

However, they could be asking Jesus to heal her daughter and thus relieve them of her shouting. If this were the reading, then Jesus' words in Matthew 15:24 would be directed toward the disciples, rather than toward the woman. This is the only interpretation that explains the words of Jesus in verse 24, since He must be responding to the disciples as they were the ones speaking to Him.

Also, His explanation describes why He is not healing her, which would further support the view that they requested Him to heal her. The disciples had seen Jesus heal Gentiles earlier (Matthew 4:24-25; 8:5-13). This difference here was only the location of the healing. So asking Him to heal her is more than plausible. Regardless, the goal of the disciples was to end their own annoyance instead of caring for the Canaanite woman.

### **The priority of Jesus (15:24)**

This reason given by Jesus is not a new concept. His answer, “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” should remind us of Jesus' words to His disciples in Matthew 10:5-6 when He sent them out, “*Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*”

The “lost sheep of the house of Israel” does not mean those who are lost within the house of Israel, but rather, the entire house of Israel are lost sheep, for Matthew 10:6 contrasts the lost sheep with the Gentiles and Samaritans. His priority was the Jewish people, for He was their Messiah. While our Lord came to die for the sins of the entire world, He came as the Messiah of Israel to the Jews first and foremost, in order to “*shepherd My people Israel*” (Matthew 2:6).

The concept of the lost sheep of the house of Israel is sourced in Jeremiah 50:6, *“My people have become lost sheep; Their shepherds have led them astray.”* The religious leaders of Israel had led the people astray in the age of Jeremiah and in the age of Jesus. Jesus was the good shepherd who would lay down His life for the sheep, for both the Jews and the Gentiles. *“I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd”* (John 10:14-16).

### **The plea repeated (15:25)**

The woman doubled her effort and *“began to bow down before Him.”* This could be read as translated by the NASB and ESV as coming to initially bow before Him or possibly be understood as her repeated bowing again and again. But certainly this posture indicates a form of worship, as seen with the disciples in Matthew 14:33.

She repeats the title “Lord” in her simple plea of *“Lord, help me!”* This is the second of three times she uses this word in addressing Jesus. Given the posture of worship, it is likely more than a term of great respect, and is a view of the authority of Jesus, certainly over the demonic realm.

### **The priority repeated (15:26)**

Matthew 15:26 has caused much discussion about Jesus’ apparent condescension toward the woman. Many understand Jesus as associating the woman with dogs when He said, *“It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”* Others seek to lessen the bluntness of these words by noting the word translated “dogs” is diminutive, and should be translated as “little dogs,” associating the woman metaphorically with a family’s household pet.

While pets as we know them were less common in the first century, they did exist, particularly among those who had some means to support them. That these dogs were *“under the table”* (Mark 7:28) leads to the view that they were not wild scavengers but were domesticated animals. Nevertheless, the point that Jesus made was not to demean the woman or Gentiles as a whole.

Rather, Jesus reiterated His point of priority. The Jews were chosen by God to have the place at the table, to be the initial recipients of the revelation of God. This priority was critical to understanding the role of Jesus in dwelling among us, along with His interactions with various Gentiles during His public ministry.

### **The priority accepted (15:27)**

The Canaanite woman understood Jesus' teaching of the priority of the Jews. In the word of Jesus to the Samaritan woman in John 4:22, "*for salvation is from the Jews.*" The woman was not offended by Jesus' analogy of the children's bread being given to the dogs, but instead she accepted it in humility. Indeed, she used the same term as Jesus did to refer to herself. She clearly did not do so in a demeaning sense, but rather in the sense of her need. Just as little dogs were dependent on the food from the table, so she was dependent upon the ministry of Jesus for the deliverance of her daughter.

Her response to Jesus included the title, "Lord," for the third time, demonstrating her acceptance of His authority, even in His description of the prioritization of the Jews by God. By stating, "*but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table,*" she was not comparing the volume of the meal, but the sequence of who receives the meal first, which was in agreement with what Jesus had told her. The words "*but even*" is literally, "*for even,*" which better describes her agreement with Jesus rather than her arguing with Jesus.

She was not considering the work of Jesus for her to be mere crumbs anymore than Jesus considered her to be a dog. These are simply metaphors to describe that the ministry of God was "*to the Jews first and also to the Greek*" (Romans 1:16). Once the Jews had the opportunity to receive the ministry of God, the Gentiles would then have received their chance.

### **The persistence rewarded (15:28)**

Her willingness to persist in her request is remarkably similar to the parable of Jesus regarding the widow who continued to come to the unrighteous judge with her desire for legal protection until the judge granted her request (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus then used this story of the persistent widow to declare, "*however, when the Son of Man come, will He find faith on the earth?*" (Luke 18:8). Jesus related the persistent request of His elect with faith in this passage.

Likewise, the Canaanite woman was commended for her faith and her request was granted to her, "*O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.*" Her persistence demonstrated her faith to all the disciples and the Lord made it a point to address her faith. The addition of the exclamation "O" provides an emotional element to Jesus' response.

The only other person besides this woman that Jesus declared as having great faith was another Gentile, the Roman centurion of Matthew 8:5-13. Both Gentiles came to Jesus for the deliverance of another, and in each case, the healing occurred immediately and from a distance. Both understood their place under the authority of God in humility. The centurion is positioned at the outset of the public ministry of Jesus to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, while the woman is positioned at the closing point of Jesus's ministry to the Jews who were not receiving Him. Their great faith served as a rebuke to the unbelieving Jews.

The daughter of the Canaanite woman was described as "*healed at once*," which further describes demon-possession as an affliction that required healing, similar to diseases. Jesus' power is evident in the healing of demon-possession, in His ability to heal from a distance, and in the perfect timing of the healing. He healed the daughter immediately, yet after his discussion with the woman. According to Mark 7:30, when she returned to her home, "*she found the child lying on the bed, the demon having left.*"

While other Gentiles had been healed by Jesus, this healing is the only case of Jesus healing a Gentile in a Gentile land. This account is the response of Jesus to the resolute opposition by the religious leaders to His ministry. This is the beginning to the Lord turning from the lost sheep of the house of Israel, with ministry to the Gentiles occurring in the context of Israel, in the ministry paradigm of the Old Testament, to leading the disciples to "*go therefore and make disciples of all the nations*" (Matthew 28:19).

## **Conclusion**

The Canaanite woman is a great example of humility before the Lord. Her basic plea, "*have mercy on me*," was based on the strong belief in Christ's ability to deliver her daughter and for her family to be blessed according to God's will. The faithful persistence of a Gentile woman serves as a rebuke to the unfaithful leaders of the Jews.

The disciples understood the priority of the Jews in God's mission to the world, but with this development, they began to understand the full sense of that mission. Prior to Christ's rejection, the world would be reached by coming to Israel to learn about God. Since Jesus was not received, this mission became the sending of God's people out to proclaim the good news of Christ to the world. In the words of John's Gospel, "*He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as receive Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God*" (John 1:11-12).

Matthew 15:21-28 serves as a hinge, turning the mission of Jesus from the lost sheep of the house of Israel, to the lost sheep of the entire world. Jesus knew the inevitability of the crucifixion was near and would lay down His life for the sheep (John 10:15-16). These sheep include the Gentiles, living in a Gentile land, such as this Canaanite woman.

The disciples would be sent to the Gentiles, who upon belief, would be joined together with the believing Jews together in the church (Ephesians 2:11-22). The purpose of the Messiah would be fulfilled through the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, including that He would suffer for the sins of mankind (Isaiah 53:4-6). The end of this will be the inclusion of the Gentiles with the Jews in the kingdom of God.

*“For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, ‘THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME.’ Again he says, ‘REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE.’” (Romans 15:8-10).*