

Healing the Gentile Crowds
Matthew 15:29-31
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In Matthew 15, Jesus had condemned the scribes and Pharisees who had come from Jerusalem for invalidating the word of God for the sake of their tradition and teaching as doctrine the precepts of men. He then instructed the disciples to *“let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.”* Jesus then departed with His disciples from the Jewish people in Gennesaret by the Sea of Galilee to the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon, where He would heal the daughter of a Canaanite woman. This would be the only miracle that Jesus would do in a Gentile land. Since this healing of a Canaanite among the Gentiles followed Jesus’ condemnation of the Jewish leaders, it marked a turn by Jesus from the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 15:24) and toward the Gentiles.

The place of the healing (15:29)

Jesus left the district of Tyre and Sidon, where He healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman, and came to the Sea of Galilee. There is evidence that Jesus arrived at the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, which was predominantly Gentile, as opposed to the western side, which was predominantly Jewish. Up to this point in His ministry, Jesus had spent the large majority of His ministry around Capernaum, on the western side of the sea.

Among the indicators in Matthew’s account that Jesus went to the Gentile eastern side of the Sea of Galilee are:

1. He *“went along by the Sea of Galilee”* (NASB) or *“walked beside the Sea of Galilee”* (ESV). Since Tyre and Sidon were to the North and West of Galilee on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, Jesus would have only come to the Sea of Galilee if he were going to the Jewish western side, and not *“along by the Sea of Galilee, traveling next to the coast.”*
2. The crowd *“glorified the God of Israel.”* This phrase is best explained if those doing the glorifying were not themselves of Israel. It would be odd for Matthew to specify which God was being glorified if the people were Jews.
3. The disciples describe the area they were in as a *“desolate place”* in Matthew 15:33, which fits the eastern side more than the western side of the Sea of Galilee.

Finally, Mark 7:31 records that Jesus went to Decapolis after He left the Canaanite woman, *“He went out from the region of Tyre, and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis.”* Decapolis was a large area of land that stretched from the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee on the north, down to the west of Perea, a couple of dozen miles to the northwest of the Dead Sea. The location of Jesus’ healing ministry and miracle of the feeding of the 4,000 will prove to be significant as development of this passage unfolds.

The people who were healed (15:30)

Only Matthew describes Jesus as ascending upon a mountain. The exact location of the mountain is unclear as there are various possibilities. What is important is that He had *“gone up on the mountain.”* The reason this is significant is due to the type of healing that is included in Matthew’s description, specifically, *“those who were lame, crippled.”*

The urgency of the need was so great that the crowds did not wait until Jesus had descended the mountain. The task of carrying the lame and crippled up the mountain to Jesus was arduous. The crippled and lame would need to be carried not only up the mountain but out to a desolate place (15:33). This demonstrated the great hope that existed toward the healing ministry of Jesus.

The distinction between the crippled and the lame is somewhat nuanced. The Greek word translated crippled literally means “crooked.” This implies that there was some damage or deformity involved. Lame is a more general term, often used in conjunction with other maladies, and involves any incapacity of the legs. How their healing was described further clarifies this distinction. The crippled were “restored” or literally, “healthy,” while the lame were described as “walking.” The damage of those crippled was restored, while the lame became functional.

Thus Jesus was able to heal all people who were unable to walk, even those with physical disabilities due to maiming or mutilation. The case of Jesus’ healing of Malchus, the servant of the high priest, whose ear Peter sliced off with a sword, is another case of such dramatic healing (Matthew 26:51-52; Luke 22:49-51; John 18:10-11).

In addition to the lame and crippled, mute people were brought to Jesus. These people were unable to communicate with others, likely because they were also deaf. Their deafness must have been brought on by disease or by an accident, since in order to speak, they would have had to have been able to hear at an old enough age to have learned a language to speak. Jesus had healed a mute man in Matthew 9:32-33 and again in Matthew 12:22, where the man was also blind.

Two blind men were also healed in Matthew 9:27-31. These types of healing had been seen before and this is why the crowds were eager to seek Him out. Furthermore, it was in this region of the Decapolis that Jesus healed the demon-possessed men (Mark 5:1-20; cf. Matthew 8:28-34), which also accounts for the growing crowds.

Jesus must have spent at least a few days in this region. The large crowds would have had to learn He was there and then have had to travel to see Him. Also, Jesus notes in Matthew 15:32 that the crowds “*remained with me now for three days.*” This must have been a busy time in the public ministry of Jesus.

The peoples’ response to the healing (15:31)

The large crowd marveled at these miracles. Specifically, each type of affliction was completely healed, so that the mute spoke, lame walked, and the blind could see. These people from this Gentile region glorified the God of Israel. They connected Jesus to the “*God of Israel,*” even if they did not recognize Him as the God of Israel.

Those who were mute were able to speak words of praise to the “*God of Israel.*” Those who were blind could see Jesus for the first time. Those who were lame and crippled would no longer need assistance to follow Jesus.

Conclusion

Jesus chose to leave His visit to the Gentile district of Tyre and Sidon, where a Canaanite woman demonstrated her great faith (Matthew 15:28), to heal many in the Gentile area of Decapolis, who responded by glorifying the God of Israel. This stands as a sharp contrast to the rejection of the words and works of Jesus among the Jews of Judea and Galilee. The acceptance of Him by Gentiles will continue to be developed in the following section of this chapter.

