



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for February 7, 2010 Released on Wednesday, February 3, 2010

"Recognized by a Canaanite Woman"

Lesson Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Background Scripture: Matthew 15:21-31; Mark 7:24-37

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 42:1-9

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.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to look at what happened between Jesus and a Canaanite woman when He traveled to Tyre and Sidon.

Principle: to understand that Jesus was justified in testing a person's faith before granting that individual's petition.

Application: to urge believers today to exercise humility, persistence, and faith when requesting divine aid.

INTRODUCTION

Plenty of Food for All

Many have lived through it. It is an embarrassing, frustrating situation. You are a guest for a meal in an unfamiliar place. You are very hungry. Your host brings out the food. To you it looks like far too little to satisfy you and the others at the meal. So as you are served, you take only a little, insisting politely that you are not very hungry but actually intending to leave enough for others.

As the meal proceeds, however, you realize that there is much more food than you thought. Bowls are refilled; new dishes are brought out. There's plenty for everyone, but you already have said that you have little appetite. Your

misunderstanding will leave you either hungry (as you decline to take more food) or humiliated (as your taking of more food proves that you are indeed hungry).

Today's text addresses a similar kind of misunderstanding. We know that God is rich in mercy. The good news of Jesus teaches us that no sinner is too far from God to be forgiven. But we easily fall into another way of thinking. We behave as if God's love and grace are in short supply and should be hoarded instead of shared freely.

Yet today's story about Jesus and the Canaanite woman and the healings that follow is a vivid demonstration of the opposite. God has more than enough for all who have need, no matter how far from Him they seem to be.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 29

Place: region of Tyre and Sidon

The first part of our lesson takes place in the region of Tyre and Sidon. This area was to the north of Galilee, which was the region where most of Jesus' ministry takes place as recorded in Matthew. Historically, Tyre and Sidon were bitter enemies of the people of Israel. The wicked queen Jezebel, who sought to replace the worship of Israel's God with the worship of the idol Baal, came from Sidon (1 Kings 16:31). The prophets had identified Tyre and Sidon as doomed to destruction because of their overweening pride that excluded worship of the true God (Isaiah 23; Ezekiel 26-28).

Yet God had made a promise that embraced Tyre and Sidon. In Psalm 87 God pledged that one day those who belong to Him would include even people from nations that have seemed most opposed to Him through history. Among these is Tyre (87:4). If God's plan is to bless all nations as He promised to Abraham (Genesis 22:18), then even these pagan, hostile cities will be included.

Still, that promise was difficult for Jesus' contemporaries to remember. For them, the people of Tyre and Sidon seemed like rich, oppressive tyrants. Those cities had made peace with the Roman government, and many of their people became wealthy with trade and seafaring. To the poorer, more isolated Jews of Galilee, the Gentiles of Tyre and Sidon posed a threat both culturally and economically. It was not easy to think warm thoughts about Tyre and Sidon one day being saved!

AN UNMET NEED (Matthew 15:21-24)

1. Where did Jesus go after Gennesaret, and why was this unusual? (Matthew 15:21)

Gennesaret was the last named physical location of Jesus' ministry (14:34). It was a small plain located on the northwestern side of the Sea of Galilee. It was apparently from there that Jesus left to go to the Phoenician region of "Tyre and Sidon" (both were Canaanite cities). This was unusual because the region was considered to be pagan and established barriers between Israel and her pagan neighbors had long existed.

Prior to leaving for Tyre and Sidon, Jesus had just instructed the disciples about the importance of inner purity versus ceremonial outer cleanliness (Matt. 15:10-20), and now He was about to have an opportunity to demonstrate that truth. One of the things the disciples were going to have to realize was that He had not come for the Jews only but also to save Gentiles. While the Jewish leaders went to extremes to be externally clean, the purity of heart that was about to be demonstrated by a Gentile was an eye-opening lesson for these disciples. Jesus' exchange with her will demonstrate what is in her heart, which is far more important than any external barriers.

2. How did this Canaanite woman initially address Jesus? What was significant about this? (vs. 22)

This term *Canaan* is quite antiquated in Jesus' time, as the people of this particular region have not been called Canaanites for hundreds of years. However, its use emphasizes the hostility between this woman's ethnic group and the Jews to whom Jesus and His disciples belong.

Canaan is depicted in Scripture as the great enemy of God's people. Canaan was the nation that was to be driven out as Israel entered the promised land (Genesis 9:24–27; Joshua 7:9; Judges 1:1, 31–33). The word *Canaan* thus is a bitter reminder of all the hostility of the past.

In the light of that antagonism, the woman's words are most remarkable. She addresses Jesus as "Son of David." That terminology is very much part of Jewish vocabulary, so it is remarkable coming from the lips of a Gentile. The phrase is based on the promise of God to David that his descendant or son would one day rule an everlasting, righteous kingdom (1 Chronicles 17:11–14; Isaiah 11:1–5). The pagan woman is using a term that acknowledges Jesus as the promised king sent by God.

In submission to Jesus, she seeks His *mercy*. Such a request can come only from a person who realizes her profound need. At the same time, the request acknowledges the superior power of the person she is addressing. She desperately needs help, and she recognizes that Jesus can supply it.

The reason for the request is that the woman's *daughter* is afflicted by a demonic spirit.

3. How did Jesus respond to her at first, and what was the disciples' response? (vs. 23)

Jesus' response to the woman's plea is stony silence. We may be surprised by this. After all, Jesus is noted for His compassion toward the needy (Matthew 4:24; 8:16, 28–32; 9:32, 33; 12:22). However, we need to keep reading to understand what His silence actually means.

The *disciples* seem surprised (or at least frustrated) as well. Apparently, the woman kept pleading until finally His disciples spoke up, asking Jesus to "send her away" because of her ceaseless cries.

The Life Application Bible Commentary makes a comment regarding the disciples' attitude and then challenges us: "It is possible to become so occupied with spiritual matters that we miss real needs right around us, especially if we are prejudiced against needy people or if they cause us inconvenience. Instead of being bothered, be aware of the opportunities that surround you."

Be open to the beauty of God's message for all people, and make an effort not to shut out those who are different from you" (Osborne and Comfort, eds., Tyndale).

4. Why was Jesus not responding to this Canaanite woman? (vs. 24)

Jesus now breaks His silence, but His response is troubling. He refuses to act on the woman's behalf because she is not part of *Israel*. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus told the disciples not to go to the Gentiles, but only to the "lost sheep of ... Israel" (Matthew 10:5, 6). Here He says the same about himself.

The bitter implication appears to be that Jesus' power to bless is for Israel only. We will need to keep reading to understand the significance of His statement.

A PRAYER ANSWERED (Matthew 15:25-28)

5. What was the woman's response to Jesus' silent and refusal to act? (v. 25)

The woman's deep submission to Jesus' power and her desperation now become all the more apparent. Again she addresses Jesus as *Lord*, asserting His supreme

authority and submitting to it. Her submission is all the clearer as she worships Him, probably lying prostrate before His feet in a gesture of complete subservience and honor. Again she pleads from a position of dire need, asking only for *help*.

6. How did Jesus tell the woman He was not going to answer her request? (v. 26)

It appears that even the woman's posture of worship does not break through Jesus' refusal to help a Gentile. Jesus told the woman that it was not proper to take the food prepared for the children of a family and throw it to the dogs instead. The word He used referred to little pet dogs, not the wild, ranging scavengers that were feared and looked down upon by people. His verbal portrait was actually a parable in which He portrayed children sitting at the dinner table while the little pet dogs hung around on the floor hoping that some "people food" would be thrown to them.

Upon first glance, Jesus' response appears downright cruel, but the story about giving the children's bread to dogs assumes that there is only enough bread for the children alone. It would be irresponsible for a parent to feed dogs and let the children go hungry. But is the bread really as limited as that? This is the very point that the woman will challenge.

7. What was the woman's reply to Jesus' answer, and what do we learn about her understanding? (v. 27)

Since the woman understood the parable, she was not the least bit offended by Jesus' statement. The woman does not argue with Jesus' story. Her submission to Jesus is complete, so much so that she begins by affirming the truthfulness of Jesus' statement. Nevertheless, she refuses to take *no* for an answer. Instead, she challenges the assumption of Jesus' story. And she does it in a way that affirms even more her faith in Jesus' power.

Her request was not that any of Israel's blessings be denied them; she wanted only enough to meet her need. Jesus' power is so great that just a crumb from His *table* will deliver her daughter from demonic oppression. Her statement "Yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (v. 27) reveals both faith and wisdom.

8. How did Jesus express His pleasure about her faith? (v. 28)

This was exactly the kind of faith Jesus was looking for. This humble Canaanite woman reached out to Him in great faith. Is it any wonder that His response displayed His pleasure? "O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt" (v. 28).

After the Canaanite woman expressed her faith, "her daughter was made whole from that very hour." Because of her recognition of Jesus and belief in who He was and what He could do, she received the desire of her heart.

Mark reports the words of Christ, "For this saying go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter." He does not say, "I will come and heal her;" he tells her that the cure is already effected. Without personal contact with the sufferer, without any command uttered to the possessing demon, by his silent will alone the wonder comes to pass. This blessing for the child was won by the mother's faith.

9. How does cross-cultural ministry benefit not only those who receive the gospel but also those who bring it?

In today's lesson, an interaction with a foreign woman helped break down the disciples' bias, set an example of great faith for them to emulate, and gave them a wider and more accurate picture of God's love, character, and abundant resources. As we interact with people of other cultural backgrounds, we may learn new styles of

Christian worship, be inspired by stories of perseverance through persecution, and develop greater compassion for people in difficult circumstances. Clearly the Canaanite woman is right: there is plenty of bread at the Lord's table, so that no one needs to be turned away.

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** The gospel is meant to go forth to the lost, not to idle among believers (Matthew 15:21).
- 2.** God's irresistible grace draws people to Jesus from the ends of the earth (v. 22).
- 3.** Beware of those who think that some are beyond the reach of God's saving grace (v. 23).
- 4.** Sometimes we do not understand God's purposes, but we must trust Him anyway (v. 24).
- 5.** True faith is willing to humble itself (without limit) to lay hold of Jesus Christ (vs. 25-26).
- 6.** True faith passes God's testing and afterward receives the full rewards of being a child of God (vs. 27-28).

CONCLUSION

Mercy for All

Clearly, the Canaanite woman was right to have the confidence that she had in Jesus. Despite her discouraging reception, she believed that Jesus had enough to give her the blessing she so desperately sought. The love of God is stronger than any social boundary; the grace of God is greater than any sin.

Sometimes we may think or act as if Jesus died only for a particular kind of people—people of our own ethnic group, nationality, or social status. Or we may think that some people are simply too far lost ever to be saved. Today's text tells us otherwise. It also reminds us that to receive Christ's mercy we need to realize how desperately we need it.

PRAYER

Lord, we confess that we sometimes act as if we are the only people whom You love. Help us to see others as You see them and to see ourselves as You see us. Remind us that Your grace is available to all. We pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Jesus didn't limit His mercy, and neither should we.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In next week's lesson, "**Declared by Peter**," Jesus asked his disciples how others evaluated him. Then he wanted their opinion. Peter, guided by the Lord, gave the right answer. Jesus promised to build His church upon that expression of truth, but Peter did not understand that Jesus would die and rise again first. Study Matthew 16:13-27.

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