



## Matthew 15:21–28

21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.” 23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” 24 He answered, “I was

sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”  
25 The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.  
26 He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” 27 “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”  
28 Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

## **Reflection**

Jesus has just publically accused Israel’s religious leaders of hypocrisy, but unlike them, Jesus practices what he preaches. And so today, after his heated exchange with the Pharisees and teachers of the

law over what makes a person unclean, Jesus leaves Israel, and for the first and only time in the gospels, enters a Gentile region.

Now as we've seen over the past few days nothing troubled the religious leaders of Israel more than becoming ceremonially unclean, and nothing made them more unclean than contact with 'unclean' Gentiles. So here is Jesus, after teaching that it is not external things that makes someone unclean in the sight of God, but the state of a person's heart, in the very next episode that Matthew records leaving Israel, entering into Gentile territory, and having a conversation with a Gentile woman. Jesus could not have chosen a more striking way to practice what he has just been preaching, because according to Jewish

religious tradition, nothing could be more unclean than a Jewish man having a conversation with a Gentile woman, in Gentile lands. And Matthew drives this point home even further by using Old Testament names for not only the regions that Jesus is visiting but also for this woman. Jewish readers would have winced at the names Tyre and Sidon and the term Canaanite. Tyre and Sidon were paradigms of Israel's enemies of old. And the Canaanites were Israel's arch enemies, worshippers of vile pagan gods who either defeated Israel militarily or seductively lured them away from God to worship their idols. Here's Jesus having a conversation with a Canaanite woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon. And in so doing, Jesus practices what he preaches, because nothing could be more *outwardly* unclean than this and yet look

at this woman's heart.

This whole encounter is extraordinary on many levels. Consider the contrast. Jesus has just very wisely left Israel, after publicly denouncing the Jewish religious leaders as self-righteous hypocrites. Outwardly they're so religious, with all their ceremonies and traditions, but inwardly their hearts are far from God, filled with pride and other kinds of evil, as they plot to kill the Messiah that God's people have been waiting for, for centuries. Jesus has just left them at the risk of death, to find safe haven amongst Israel's enemies. And here he is – in an encounter that a Pharisee would have run a mile from, just at the thought of how unclean it would make him – with a Gentile woman on her knees in worship, three times calling him Lord,

identifying him as the Messiah, the son of David, and displaying a faith almost unparalleled in Matthew's gospel. The only real rival to her faith being another Gentile enemy of Israel, the Roman Centurion of Matthew 8. Consider this extraordinary contrast. Not only does Jesus practice what he preaches but Matthew is showing us that what Jesus is preaching is true. All the outward religious practices in the world don't make you clean, and this woman has none of them, but look at her heart, that's what makes you right in the eyes of God. A heart like her's.

And yet this passage isn't without a few rough edges. For instance, Jesus calls her a 'dog'. Surely in this age or any age calling someone a 'dog' is an insult? But as we've seen time and time again, Jesus

has a way with words and he is not one to waste words. He uses words startlingly, and to maximum effect. So let's work through this scene and see if we can understand.

This woman's daughter is in a terrible way. She's been crying out to Jesus persistently. And look at her words, she begins every statement with 'Lord'. She calls him 'Son of David', she knows he's the Messiah. At the outset she asks for his mercy and she doesn't give up because she knows he has the power to save her daughter. Even the disciples seem to side with her. When they say 'send her away' it's likely they mean 'send her away with her daughter healed' otherwise Jesus wouldn't have answered them with:

‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.’

Notice that firstly Jesus is silent. She persists. Then when his disciples intervene, he says to them that as the Messiah he’s come to be king over God’s people, his mission is to the lost sheep of Israel. She still persists. Finally, Jesus addresses her directly and refers to her as a dog. Yet she still persists. Is Jesus testing her faith? Is Jesus making a point of her faith? Is Jesus growing her faith? I think yes to all three.

But what about the dog comment? In Jesus’ day, Jewish people referred to non-Jews as ‘dogs’ – it was the strongest of insults – vicious, feral animals that roamed the streets and ate filth; dogs were the very symbol of uncleanness. But Jesus here



is using a play on words. You can almost see the twinkle in his eye, the smile on his face, and hear the warmth in his tone as he considers the great faith of this woman. Faith is what Jesus loves the most. The term Jesus uses is not one for a feral dog, but for a domesticated pet, the kind that would run beneath your children's legs at the dinner table. He's making his point in a warm way, 'I've been sent to the Jewish nation, you're not one of us my child.'

And yet the woman, quick as a flash, responds so brilliantly. She's seen her opening, the opening Jesus has given her, and she responds in great faith. She might well have said, 'Well, Jesus, if you've only come for the lost sheep of Israel, then what are you doing in these Gentile lands, if not to come to me?' But she didn't, instead she

turns Jesus' words back on himself and wins both the argument and his great admiration. Stop for a moment and consider if you've ever seen this happen anywhere else in all of the gospels, someone else having the last word in a conversation with Jesus! Of course Jesus sets this up for her, he made it so hard for her and she still triumphed; and in doing so see how he has showcased her great faith. Look at the honour that is hers and look at the point that Jesus is making. In contrast to the Jewish religious leaders, it's hearts like these that are clean in the sight of God.

Hearts like hers. Spend some time now thinking deeply over this woman's faith. Look at her persistence. Are you persistent in prayer, despite the setbacks, despite the delays? Great things happen when

godly men and women are persistent in prayer. Look at her faith. It's in Jesus, not in her own competency, in her abilities or track record, in her career path, or in anything else. Her faith is in Jesus, her Lord, the Lord of her life, the one who can do anything when you approach him in faith. And how does she approach him? Not through anything that she's done, not because she's lived a good life, or earned his regard by being a good Christian. She approaches him simply with 'Lord have mercy on me.'

There's so much more that we could discuss but it's time to pray. Pray this morning for a faith like this Canaanite woman's. Pray that your prayer life might be as bold, persistent and unwavering as hers. That your faith might be a beacon for Jesus in

our Gentile lands and that he may exclaim over you, 'Child, what great faith you have! Your request is granted.'