



Matthew 15:29–31

29 Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. 30 Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. 31 The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they

praised the God of Israel.

Reflection

Matthew's gospel is renowned as the most Jewish of the four gospels. Just think about all the Old Testament references we've seen, his emphasis on Jesus being the Messiah, and the coming in Jesus of the kingdom of God. Each of the gospels have their own emphases and Matthew's one is the most Jewish in character. And yet it is also the gospel that is most open to the Gentiles. We see this throughout. Gentile Magi came to worship the newborn Jesus in chapter 2, in Matthew chapter 15 Jesus is currently ministering in Gentile lands, two of the highest examples of faith in his gospel are a Roman centurion in Matthew chapter 8 and the Canaanite women in

yesterday's passage, and Matthew's gospel will end with the Great Commission, the summary and high point of its message in Matthew 28, which is essentially to 'go and make disciples of all nations.' Today's passage does much to bring out this contrast, and Matthew's surprising emphasis on Gentiles within this, the most Jewish of gospels.

In today's passage Jesus is still in Gentile lands. He's left the region of the port towns of Tyre and Sidon and is travelling along the Sea of Galilee down its south eastern coast towards the Decapolis. Jesus has made similar journeys on the other side of the lake, ministering to the Jews in Israel's territories. But in today's passage he's ministering to Gentiles in their own lands.

What's more we read the verses in front of us still basking in the afterglow of the remarkable faith of the Canaanite woman. We can't help but contrast her great faith, found in the most unlikely of places, with the evil hearts of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. She was a Canaanite living near Tyre and Sidon, historically a bitter enemy of God's people living in a hostile part of the world, and yet she cried out to Jesus as her Lord, identified him as the son of David, the Messiah, begged him for mercy and astounded Jesus by her great faith. In contrast, the religious leaders of God's people, come from Jerusalem to speak with Jesus, not only don't recognise him as the Messiah but are plotting in their hearts to have him killed.

And yet in the afterglow of this woman's

faith there is also ambiguity. Didn't Jesus just say in verse 24,

'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel'

If this is the case what then is he doing in Gentile lands and encountering a women such as this? And why has he basically had to flee Israel? The Jewish crowds in Galilee have been lukewarm at best and Israel's religious leaders have rejected him outright. It's exactly questions like these that Matthew is addressing in this section of his gospel. Let's begin with verse 29,

29 Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down.

Jesus has sat down on a mountainside before, in Matthew chapters 5–7 where he preached the Sermon on the Mount to Israel. After that in Matthew chapters 8–9 you'll remember that Jesus proved the authority of his words by his works, when he healed many. Now it's the Gentiles turn. Jesus is on another mountainside, sitting down and presumably teaching. We read in our next verse that great crowds came to him and were healed. In his missionary discourse in Matthew chapter 10 Jesus had taught his disciples that mission was first to the Jews and then later to the Gentiles. Here it is beginning to play out in his own ministry, just as it will in theirs.

But perhaps even more significantly, we read in verse 31,

31 The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

These words echo Jesus' response to the John the Baptist's disciples when they came to him in chapter 11, asking if Jesus truly was the Messiah. Jesus quoted Isaiah's prophecy back to them, simply saying, look around you, Isaiah prophesied in my day that 'the blind would receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy would be cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead would be raised, and the good news would be proclaimed to the poor.' Our verses today, mirror this statement, with Matthew making the strong point that the kingdom of God is not just for the Jewish

nation but in fact for people from every nation. And Matthew hammers this point home with his final seven words.

‘And they praised the God of Israel.’

In a passage filled with similarities between Jesus’ ministry to the Jews and his ministry to the Gentiles this is the one, glaring difference. Nowhere is it said of Jewish crowds that ‘they praised the God of Israel.’ Firstly the extraordinary faith of the Canaanite woman, building on the faith of the Roman Centurion the likes of which Jesus had not found amongst the entire Israelite nation (his disciples included), and now, the first crowds to worship the God of Israel through the ministry of Jesus are Gentile crowds.

Way back in Genesis 12 God promised that all the nations would be blessed through Israel. And those crumbs of bread so preciously gathered from under her Master's table by that Canaanite woman of faith in yesterday's passage was the beginning of something truly great. But more on that tomorrow.

Think & Pray

For now, please take some time to think deeply over the passage in front of us. Jesus was the first missionary, sent from heaven to a faraway land, to the people of earth who were worshipping anything and everything in place of God. First he took the gospel to God's people, they had their opportunity, but it largely fell on deaf ears. Now he's taking the gospel to the

nations, in word and deed, in action and in truth, practicing what he preaches. And look at them respond in worship of God! Jesus had left lands that were familiar with God, religion had become run-of-mill, a synagogue on every corner, outward displays of faith, a religious culture and religious routines; but inside, the people's hearts were sinful and wayward, worshipping God in vain. Jesus left them to go to nations without their religious history. He went to pagan nations, to the unlikeliest people and places on earth, to Canaanites in Tyre and Sidon, and look at how they respond to him and his gospel. Look at the way their worship puts the Jewish nation to shame.

As you reflect on this it's not too hard to draw parallels between our hardened,

Western, post-Christian society and the explosive growth of Christianity in other parts of the world. Are you tired of the gospel falling on deaf ears? When was the last time you considered overseas mission? Do you support it financially, how often do you remember it in your prayers, do you have a good reason for not having gone? Passages like this raise questions like these in a gospel like the one in front of us.

Please pray over our passage and your answer to these questions now. And be sure to praise God for his gospel that has gone out to the ends of the earth and continues, every day, to receive responses like theirs. That response again,

‘And they praised the God of Israel.’