

# The Faith of a Canaanite Woman

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Well, I'm really thankful for the opportunity that I've had during the summer to work as an intern here. It's really a blessing. I've enjoyed every moment of it. Shout out to the WEB youth on Friday nights, who listen to my constant ramblings, and for the Filipino bible study on Saturday nights. I'm still trusting that the Tagalog you sent me isn't any swear words or anything, but... [congregation laughs] I'll have to trust you on that. [speaks a Tagalog word] I've butchered it. Well... [laughs] Thank you very much, though. I've really enjoyed the summer.

So I've been spending a lot of time trying to think of what obscure or troubling Old Testament passage to consider for my last Sunday here. We've considered a whole lot of pretty interesting stories, right? We've considered Uzzah, who was carrying the Ark of the Covenant and touched it and was killed for it. We've considered David and his complicated relationship with his wife, Michal. We've considered David doing a census and God almost killing all of Israel for it. Kind of interesting. We've considered Saul and his demise and his fall from being the king over Israel. And we've considered a story about when Jael straight-up murdered a guy with a tent peg. I don't know. There's a lot of super interesting stories in the Old Testament that are troubling, that are obscure, and yet, every single one of them are relevant to our lives. All of them were written down as examples for *us* to learn from. All of them are relevant even though at some times it's hard to see *how* they could be relevant. Like, it just shows us how the bible accurately tells us that life isn't like a bed of roses. Life isn't easy. Life is hard, there are moral situations where we really can't figure out what's going on, and life can be tough. And the bible accurately tells us this. It's remarkable for how honest it is to life.

And so, for this last Sunday in this kind of series that we're considering, I wasn't sure which story to pick from in the Old Testament. Then I got to thinking: why limit the scope of our study to the Old Testament? Because the New Testament also has some pretty troubling stories and obscure stories that are hard to deal with. So often we think that, you know, the New Testament is a happier part of the bible as compared to the Old Testament. Like, sometimes the Old Testament is hard sluggin'. It's hard to figure out, you know, exactly how this applies to my life sometimes. It takes more time to think through. But the New Testament, right, is usually pretty clear and we've got no questions at all about it. It poses no problems, right? Wrong! It does! There are some stories in the New Testament that kind of just make you question and wonder, "Well, what's that about? How does that apply to my life?" And there's one story in particular that I have found troubling to *me*, and it's kind of obscure. It comes from the life of Jesus, which doesn't seem right, but... This story, I've read it in the past, I've found it kind of troubling and I just put it in the back of my mind, and I don't think about it, and I just kind of go through, you know, my reading plan. Sometimes it's easier to follow the bible reading plan than to let the troubling passage hit my heart. So, well, today we're going to consider it, and we're going to see that in it is actually the heart and soul of our Christian faith.

If you have a bible, please turn to Matthew 15:21. Matthew 15:21. Found on the pages 693 or 797 in the bibles in the seat in front of you, depending which bible you have there. The story takes place basically right in the middle of the book of Matthew. Jesus had just finished rebuking the Pharisees for their misunderstanding of what purity and impurity is. It's not what goes into a person that makes them unclean before God, but what comes *out* of a person that makes them clean or unclean. And eating with unwashed hands, whether that, you know, it might be a little gross, but it doesn't make a person unclean before God. But out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, all these things, and *that's* what makes a person unclean before God. And so, after He has dispute with the Pharisees, he departs into this other region called Tyre and Sidon, which is about northwest of Israel, and He has a very interesting encounter with a woman there. So let's take a look. It's Matthew 15:21 and we'll read up to verse 28, and I'm reading from the New International Version. Starting at verse 21:

***Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 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."***

***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."***

***He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."***

***The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.***

***He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."***

***"Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."***

***Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.***

(NIV)

That's kind of a strange story. It's strange and troubling for many reasons, but one of the biggest reasons is that Jesus seems very mean here. Uncharacteristically, Jesus appears to have it out for this woman, and it's hard to see why. I mean, this lady has come to Him out of a desperate need. Her daughter is possessed by a demon. Who knows how long this has been going on for, or, you know, what kind of things this has manifesting in, but this is causing unbelievable terror and sadness for the whole family, and specifically, to this woman, to the mother. And so, she hears that, kind of miraculously, Jesus is coming up to her region. Jesus would never come up here, right? But He's coming up. And so, out of desperation, she goes to Him, knowing that only Jesus has the power to heal her daughter. She comes out in desperation – she doesn't even bring her daughter – she just comes out knowing that Jesus is the only option, and she cries out to Jesus, and what does verse 23 say?

***Jesus did not answer a word.***

(NIV)

I mean, that doesn't sound right. I mean, Jesus isn't like that! Jesus is the one that would leave the 99 sheep to go find the one sheep. How could Jesus ignore her plea? And Matthew, who's writing this book for us, doesn't see it as any problem that he's including this. He doesn't see it as any problem to the fact that this is supposed to be the good news of Jesus Christ. Somehow he sees this as good news, and I'm like, "How on earth is this preaching the good news?" Well, Jesus isn't being a jerk here. Nor is Matthew crazy for including this story in the gospel. No, in spite of how rough and harsh it sounds, Jesus *is* actually preaching the good news in this story. And it just requires us to look through it one more time.

So let's look over it again. In verse 21 it tells us that Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And now, immediately, that's actually a very significant move, because where He's going into is a predominantly gentile region, whereas Jesus and His disciples are Jewish. Now, if you're not sure what, you know, gentile and Jew, what these terms mean, essentially, a Jewish person, so we're not thinking modern-day Judaism as the religion. We're talking about those who were the ethnic descendants of Abraham – that's what a Jew was. A Jew was a person who was related to Abraham. A gentile, by contrast, was the term that the Jews used of everyone who was *not* related to Abraham. But more than that, the term "gentile" kind of carried with it the connotation of people who did not have a relationship with the Living God. Whereas the Jewish people had a relationship with God, those who were gentiles, those who were not related to Abraham, were not in a special relationship with God. If you recall back in the Old Testament, God chose to dwell with the descendants of Abraham, the Jewish people, and develop that special relationship with them, that He would live with them in the physical land of Israel, and that, through this, God would bring blessings to *all* the nations, and restore the paradise of Eden to the world again. But until then, there was a divide. There were the Jews, who knew God, or at least were supposed to know God, and there were gentiles, who did not know God. And some gentiles in the Old Testament did come to know the Lord, but on the whole, if you're a gentile, you have no hope in the world.

I have a chart here, it's high-quality, I spent the big bucks on this one, right? Kind of summarizing the differences there, but the main thing that you need to take is that the Jews were supposed to have known God, and the gentiles were not supposed to have known God. And yet, here is Jesus going into a region of gentiles, in Tyre and Sidon, which is already a little strange. So, unsurprisingly, then, this woman comes up to Jesus. Jesus should have expected this, because wherever He goes, people keep on going to Him to try to get healing, to try to help get, you know, relief from what they're suffering. And so this shouldn't have been a shock to Jesus. But what's surprising, what's really strange, and what *nobody* would have considered as possible, is what the woman says in verse 22. The woman says:

***"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!"***

(NIV)

"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" I just said that the gentiles were supposed to be those people who were totally cut off from any relationship with God. They were spiritually lost. They had no relationship with God. They should have nothing to do with God. And *yet*, here is this woman who calls Jesus both Lord and the Son of David! If Matthew hadn't told me that this woman was a gentile, what would I have assumed?

That this person was a Jew! I would have thought this person understood something about God. She seems to know the role Jesus played. She seemed to know that Jesus was the Messiah and the Savior of Israel. That's what the Son of David kind of points to. And she seems to recognize that Jesus is her Lord and that she needs mercy! This gentile does not sound like a person who *doesn't* know God; she sounds like somebody who *does* know God! She sounds like she's Jewish! And, in fact, the words she uses here had been used by other Jewish believers in Christ in other places in the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 9:27, two blind men hear Jesus passing by and they cry out:

***“Have mercy on us, Son of David!”***

(NIV)

In Matthew 17:15, a Jewish father calls on Jesus to heal his son, and he says:

***“Lord, have mercy on my son...”***

(NIV)

And in Matthew 20:30, another group of blind men call to Jesus, and they say the exact same thing this woman says:

***“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”***

(NIV)

In each of these cases, Jesus hears their request, and He grants them healing. This phrase was a well-known phrase that expressed a person's faith in Jesus. Those who were suffering within Israel would cry out in their despair to the Savior, to the Messiah of Israel, knowing that only in Him would they find deliverance. And Matthew just doesn't record these events for us because it's kind of interesting, like, “Cool, Jesus is healing people.” He doesn't do that just for that sake. No, he includes these stories of physical healing, of those who turned to Jesus for physical healing, as an example for every one of us who's reading his gospel, for how we need to turn to Jesus for our spiritual healing. In the same way that they turned to Him to get the physical healing that they needed is the pattern for which we must have desperation, calling after and desire for the healing that Jesus can give to us spiritually, and *only* Him, and it's only on the basis of faith. It's not on the basis of anything this woman or these blind men or anyone was doing; they always approached Jesus on the basis of faith. Jesus affirms their faith, and grants them healing. Matthew includes that for us as his readers, so that we know that's the same kind of way we need to approach Jesus, as well, to get the healing we desperately need. Crying out to Jesus for spiritual life.

And so, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy,” was a statement of faith made by those who knew God, and knew how much they *needed* God for life, and this gentile woman makes the exact same confession. And Jesus doesn't answer her a word. Jesus doesn't even respond. Whereas with those who were born a Jew, Jesus would grant healing; for this gentile woman, He doesn't even hear her cries for help. Her entire fate is in His hands, and He doesn't say anything. And I'm trying to figure out, well, what's going on? What gives with that? Well, what gives is that this is not just any ordinary gentile woman. The text explicitly says in verse 22 that this was a Canaanite woman.

Now, if you're familiar with the Old Testament, you will be familiar with who the Canaanite people were. These were a special group of gentiles, a special group of people who did not know God. These were the people who were responsible for leading the nation of Israel - Jewish believers, the ethnic descendants of Abraham -

leading them astray from worshipping God into worshipping idols. Again and again, the Canaanite people proved to be the most vile and wicked snares to Israel, leading them to act unfaithfully to God, and - this is crazy because this is the one nation on the entire planet that had a relationship with God - was led astray from God by the Canaanite people.

And so Jesus doesn't answer her a word, which you'd think would make sense, right? Okay, that makes sense. Jesus doesn't answer her a word. Because what does she represent? She represents everything – according to the mind of the Jewish people – everything that's wrong in the world. Because not only were the Canaanites content to sin and to go away from God, they were also willing to lead others astray with them. So if any group of people were beyond saving, it was the gentile Canaanites. They cannot know God. They do not and they cannot know God. Right? And yet, notice something interesting. Jesus doesn't respond to her, which seems, you know, cold and harsh, but potentially understandable. But though He doesn't respond, He doesn't send her away. Though He doesn't respond *to* her, doesn't answer her, He doesn't send her away, either. And the disciples, as God-fearing Jews, pick up on Jesus' failure to send her away, and so they urge Him. They say, "Send her away, for she keeps on crying out after us!" The disciples did not miss the fact that this woman was not only a godless gentile, she was, in fact, one of the active enemies of God! They didn't miss this fact!

And so she keeps on crying out for salvation that shouldn't be given to them, and so the disciples are like, "Send her away." And Jesus doesn't. Jesus doesn't send her away. And this should start to cue in our minds, start to think that perhaps Jesus' silence toward the woman is less directed toward the woman, and more directed toward the disciples. There's something that the disciples needed to see and know, and it requires that Jesus not respond to this woman *yet*. And so, He answers the disciples – and it's interesting, that phrase, it's like He's answering – He says, in verse 24:

***"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."***

(NIV – emphasis added)

And, I mean, that sounds pretty good, right? Okay, that sounds good. Except that it makes no sense, because the disciples were not disputing that fact! But it's phrased as if Jesus was responding to them. ***"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."*** The disciples were not disputing this fact. That was, in fact, the very thing they were assuming, right? "Of course, yes, Jesus, You were sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. That's why You need to send her away!" Because she's not supposed to be having this thing, right? That's what they were thinking! Jesus' words are not matching with His actions. And yet, Jesus *still* does not send her away! So, if I were a disciple, I would be kind of losing my mind here, but anyway, the woman continues coming to Jesus, then. Because He refuses to send her away, the woman comes back again. And so, it says that she came and knelt before him and said:

***"Lord, help me!"***

(NIV)

And she has no right to ask this, according to the disciples. She has no right. She is a Canaanite, the active enemies of God, she has no right to ask for this. Because Jesus came for the Jews, Jesus came for the chosen people; He did not come for the non-chosen people, is what they would be saying. And so, interestingly enough, Jesus

then replies to the woman. So the woman comes and says, you know, “Help me,” and He responds with this:

***“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”***

(NIV)

This woman isn’t fitting into the category that she needs to fit into, right? Jesus is the Messiah for the Jewish people, those ethnic descendants of Abraham. Jesus was not sent to the gentiles, and yet this woman, a gentile, a Canaanite, is asking for Jesus to exercise His healing ministry in a foreign land. It’s not right. It’s not right to give the bread that was meant for the children and give it to their dogs. And that is an incredibly harsh statement to make! Jesus refers to the sheep of Israel as the children, whereas the dogs are the gentiles. By calling this woman – and by extension all gentiles – dogs, doesn’t seem like the most tactful statement to ever make. It doesn’t seem like it’s the nicest statement to make. The politest statement. And the disciples would be nodding their heads at this exact moment. They would be saying, “Yes! Finally Jesus is making sense! This woman has *no* rightful claim on the salvation that God promised to His people, Israel.” If a parent gave the food that was meant for their children to a dog, to their dog, you would arrest that parent, right? If they’re neglecting to feed their children, which is bread is for, and gave it to their dog, that’s a bad parent. Dogs have dog food, humans have human food. That’s a fact of life. And the disciples would be affirming everything Jesus is saying here, and *that’s* why it’s so troubling. How can Jesus call any human being a dog? It’s not what Jesus does! Jesus is the one person who should *never* say that, and we need to let those words hit us, because it’s a harsh thing to say. And, I mean, I know the Canaanites were not a good people, but what could ever justify calling somebody a dog? It’s a harsh thing to say. Jesus, how can You say that? I understand that the *disciples* might be thinking that, but how could *You* say that? How could this woman be a dog in Jesus’ eyes?

Or *is* this woman a dog in Jesus’ eyes? Clearly, the disciples would be thinking, “Oh, yes. You know, yes, she’s a dog.” Clearly, she’s a dog in the disciples’ eyes. But is Jesus really affirming this way of thinking? Or is He using this way of thinking to make a point *to* His disciples? Because remember, Jesus *chose* to go to Tyre and Sidon! No one forced Him to; He decided He was going to go up there. Which would have been totally scandalous to the disciples, who would have nothing to do with the gentiles. His disciples are Jewish, right? They belong to the family of God. They have the distinguished blessing of being called the children of God. But earlier on in the gospel of Matthew, we read something interesting about what makes a person a Jew and what makes a person a non-Jew. John the Baptist says this, because, you know, being a Jew is related ethnically to Abraham, he says this:

***And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.***

(NIV – emphasis added)

It’s already been stated in the gospel of Matthew that what matters is not being ethnically related to Abraham; what matters is what’s in the heart. And if, by a confession of a person’s heart, a person who is ethnically Jewish might not be considered a child of God, could it also be the case that a gentile, who’s not related to Abraham, because of their confession of faith, would it fit that they might be called a

child of God? You see, this woman isn't fitting nicely into any categories, right? She's a gentile, she's a Canaanite, and yet she speaks like a person who knows God. And so, it's super interesting what she then goes on to say, right? Showing what's truly in her heart, she says, in response to what Jesus says:

***“Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”***

(NIV)

In humility, this woman recognizes that what belongs to the Jews – mainly the benefits of salvation, that's what the bread's representing there, the benefits of salvation, the restored relationship with the living and true God – this doesn't naturally belong to her! And yet, look at the word picture she uses. She describes the provision of God as being so abundant that it's literally falling from the table onto the ground. There is so much of it, and so her confession is essentially saying can't she, though she's a gentile, partake in this same salvation? If there's so much of it, why can't she be included, as well? Though she's not a *Jew*, if she exercises faith *in* Jesus, cannot she also participate in the salvation she desperately needs? And it's at this point that Jesus, counter to everything else that He seemed to be saying, affirms her faith and grants her request. He says:

***“Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”***

(NIV)

And the disciples would be thinking, “You were sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, right? How can you give the salvation that was meant for the Jews to a gentile, the enemy of God? How can you give the bread that belongs to the children and give it to the dogs?” He can do so because this woman is not a dog, even though they think she is. No, this woman is, in fact, a child of God on the basis of her faith, entirely. Jesus, He says this, He says:

***“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”***

(NIV – emphasis added)

He was *only* sent to the lost sheep of Israel. But He gives healing to this woman. The only logical connection would be, then, between that statement and what Jesus does, is that this woman, too, is a child of God. She is one of those lost sheep that Jesus came to save! The bread belongs to *her* as much as it belongs to the disciples, for she believes in Jesus Christ. And though, at first, Jesus seems harsh or unfeeling, it was, in fact, a way for Him to contradict the way of thought that would have excluded this gentile woman from participating in the family of God. By faith *anyone*, including a *Canaanite*, can be called a child of God. This is essentially telling us the significance of what happened earlier on this chapter, in verses 1 through 20, where what makes a person clean or unclean is not what goes in but what comes out of a person. If a gentile enemy of God, who is unclean by every possible imaginable way, before God being entirely unclean, if a gentile Canaanite, by confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord could be included in the family of God, then *anyone* can be included in God's family through faith in Jesus Christ. Though by birth this woman is a gentile, by faith, she *is* a child of God.

And this is relevant to *us* because most of us, if not all of us, here right now are gentiles. And we've only come to know the blessings of Christ's salvation by faith in Him. Each one of us should be the dogs. We should *never* have come to the salvation that Jesus supplies. None of us should! If you're a gentile, which pretty much all of us are, we come from a people group that was not related to Abraham, that did not have hope in

the world! Each one of us had an ancestor living during the time Jesus walked on the earth, who either did not know about Jesus or had absolutely no care about Jesus. They lived their lives, and then they died like any other gentile. Our ancestors only knew the futility of life that is described in the book of Ecclesiastes, where the world is empty.

***“Meaningless! Meaningless!”  
says the Teacher.  
“Utterly meaningless!  
Everything is meaningless.”***

(NIV)

Because you're going to die. And because you're going to die, everything you do in life will end. You want to live your life in a wise, good manner, but you're going to die just like the foolish person. You want to build something that will last and last for the ages? Eventually, it will be destroyed. You want your name to be recognized, but eventually, you're going to be forgotten. *That* is the way of life of the gentiles, of all of our ancestors. Away from God, and without hope in the world because death makes everything meaningless, and that makes everything have no hope.

But Jesus' words here completely change the game for us. Because one way or another, because of what Jesus has said here, because, by faith, you can be included in the family of God, each and every one of us can have hope in our lives. Some way or another, the gospel has reached *you*. And from the very beginning of the gospel message, the gospel has been going out to the whole world. Ethiopia was probably the first mission field because of the Ethiopian eunuch, and the church has been in Ethiopia for centuries, millennia. North Africa and Egypt were the hubs of Christianity. The Middle East, central Asia, for hundreds of years were the heartland of Christianity. The gospel reached China by the 600s, and from there missionaries would go forth. And the gospel entered Europe only when the apostle Paul went through Macedon in Acts 16. However it happened, every single one of us have been encountered with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and though we *should have* died in our sins and had no hope in life, because of Jesus Christ, we can have hope. Because He conquered death so that we don't have to die eternally. As Ephesians 2 tells us:

***...remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” [that is, the Jewish people] (which is done in the body by human hands)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ...***

***...Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household...***

(NIV – emphasis added)

We who were once far off have now been given hope because our life *can* have meaning because Jesus conquered death and has announced good news to us who were lost. Death does not have to be the end! Life can have meaning! And sin no longer has to have dominion over us, because in Christ, through faith, we are part of God's family. And if you're here today and you've not exercised faith in Jesus, never

think that you are too far down the road to be saved. That you've sinned too much and no longer could possibly have God's salvation. Because the reality is if a *Canaanite* can be included in the family of God, then *anybody* can. The Canaanites were not a good group of people. You look at their history. They were into child sacrifice to Molek, right? And they led Israel to do the same thing. That is a history that is bad, and it's ugly.

But this woman did not have to be defined by her history. She still turned to Jesus and found a place in His family. And you, too, must throw away the sins that have *never* helped you, that have *never* satisfied you, and turn to Jesus. For Jesus has promised that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified and it's with your mouth that you confess and are saved. The promise *is* for you. He does not promise that the road is going to be *easy*, that there's not going to be suffering; there most certainly will be suffering, but it's the only road that leads to life. It's the only road that actually has hope. It's the only road that keeps us from living meaningless life that Ecclesiastes tells us. And for us here who *have* believed in Jesus, who come from a gentile background, we must remember and rejoice in the fact that at one time, we were lost, but now we have hope through Jesus Christ. The Canaanite woman should have been rejected like each and every one of us, and yet she's been included. And as 1 John 3 says:

***See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!***

(NIV)

And so that's something we have to live in hope, because every day, some days, it just feels so mundane, our life is just, we're just living, we're doing work, we're kind of whatever, right? Feels like it's nothing. But every day we can have an abiding joy and hope that death is not our end, that we *will* live forever in the family of God. And let us never think, like the disciples, that some people are less worthy to receive the gospel than others, because *no one* is *ever* lost *far* enough that they can't be saved by God. And so, unlike the disciples, there's no tension, there's no personal hatred that should *ever* dispose us from excluding somebody from God's family. For as the scripture says:

***"Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him... And by God's grace, let all of us who are near and far, gentile or Jew, hold fast to this truth, that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord – like the Canaanite woman – will be saved."***

(NIV – emphasis added)

Amen.

[praying]

Dear Lord, thank You so much for Your message, Lord. Your message that every single one of us can be saved, and that, though we were far off, though we shouldn't have had hope, through Jesus Christ, *anyone* can have hope. And I pray, Lord, that You'll help us to live into that truth, to trust in You, oh Lord. As we go through the motions of the day, please be with us, oh God, as we leave this place. In Jesus' name, amen.