

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Matthew 15:21-28

Verses 21-23a

Jesus left there and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A surprising thing happened; a Canaanite woman came forward from that area. She cried out saying, "Have mercy on me Lord, son of David. My daughter is badly hurt by a demon." But he did not answer her a word.

This well known pericope reveals both the compassion of Jesus and the tenacious faith that a non-Jewish person can have. The work of God in a person's life is both individual and distinct as well as perfectly mysterious. Our Lord Jesus shows this inscrutable nature of God.

Tyre and Sidon were clearly Gentile areas but Matthew uses even a stronger word, **Canaanite**. She is not merely a non-Jew but the worst of pagans. The language used here thus betrays the deep divisions of race and religion experienced by both Jewish and non-Jewish believers. Matthew picks up on this situation by employing the Hebraism: behold, translated here as **a surprising thing happened**. Knowing how Jews felt about Gentiles and Canaanites, how could this woman be so audacious and approach the rabbi? **Having come out**, probably of her house and to the road, the woman made for Jesus. She made her need obvious by **calling out: my daughter is badly demon possessed**. No further details are given but we do know from the gospels that often maladies were described as demon possession though no actual possession is evident. Verse 28 indicates that there was a sickness of some kind. That Satan uses natural means to afflict us is no different to saying that God uses natural means to bless us. But we do know that the sickness – it could not have been an injury – was particularly **bad** *κακως*.

Her opening statement deserves attention. She calls Jesus, **Lord, son of David**. This is an exalted Messianic title indicating divine and human lordship. This is extraordinary, for this "unbeliever" is closer to her Lord than many in Israel were at that time. We can only assume that she already knew about Jesus and had come to this conclusion.

But he did not answer her a word. Matthew presents the situation as a drama, a contest for recognition by an outsider with the one who has the power to do something. This is the first rebuff. God's silence is ubiquitous in the Old Testament, indeed he at times is apparently hostile towards openly his people. We can think of Jacob facing his Esau, God wrestling with him at the Jabbok and also Abraham's test and the demand he offer up his son Isaac. The many examples of God acting unlike God are added to by Jesus. He deliberately ignores the poor woman. Readers know how this will end and will conclude that Jesus had a divine purpose in mind.

Verses 23b,24

The disciples were coming up to him, imploring him, "Get rid of her! She keeps shouting us." He gave his answer, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

The reaction of the disciples arose because **she kept crying after them**. The woman, having not succeeded in her appeal to Jesus, tried with his deputies. but the strong demand, **get rid of her**, *ἀπόλυσον αυτήν* reveals their contempt for her. Being a woman may not have helped either.

Jesus was deliberately silent and shut off to her and when he did speak the rebuff (the second) seems absolute: **I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel**. It is interesting that our Lord had this conception of his ministry. Matt 4:17 records that he called people to repent in view of the nearness of the Kingdom. Here, he provides more detail: his preaching is aimed at the **lost** *τα ἀπολωλότα* **sheep**, not only the prostitutes but the religious hypocrites, the smug rich and complacent, political hierarchy of the church. But his mission was to these people amongst the Jewish people because God's covenant is with them (10:5,6). They are the chosen and it is from them that the Messiah and indeed, salvation are to come (Jn 4:22; Rom 11:17,18; 15:8).

Verses 25

Having got through she knelt before him saying, “Lord, help me.” He replied, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” “Yes Lord”, she said, “but the puppies eat from the crumbs that fall from master’s table.”

To this, the woman had no answer and could only repeat her plea, though more powerfully, for she manages to get through the cordon of the disciples and place herself in front of Jesus, kneeling before him. Perhaps the fact that he had begun to talk was already a signal for hope and a chance to repeat, **Lord, help me**. This literally means, provide help for me.

The third time Jesus rebuffed her he said, **“It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”** The word for **dogs** κυνάρῳς refers to the dogs of the streets, the mongrels. It is well known that while a proselyte or foreigner living in conformity with Jewish practices about the Sabbath, dietary laws etc was treated respectfully. But Gentiles and those in other nations were treated as unclean, taboo and completely untouchable. A Jew could not enter the home of a Canaanite. Jesus was well aware of teaching or healing amongst those who despised the word of God (7:6).

Again, Jesus was deliberately provoking this woman to faith, perhaps enabling her to present the genuineness of her faith before the wary Jews. Jesus asked blind Bartimaeus, a person also on the outer and also blocked by the disciples, what he wanted (Mk 10:51). Jesus needed to probe because he may have only wanted money. Was the woman only using a formula she had learnt from others about the Messiah being the Son of David but had not trust at all?

The woman was not deterred by this brutal rebuff and spoke these memorable words: **“Yes Lord”, she said, “but the puppies eat from the crumbs that fall from master’s table.”** The word for the animals here is κυνάρῳς and is like a diminutive form, **puppies** or **house pets**. It was a brilliant answer and was reminiscent of our Lord’s way of outsmarting his enemies. She trapped him in his own word and held him true to it. She did not say that she was worthy, or should be equal to a Jew, or that her pagan faith was as sincere as Jewish believers and responded by saying, **yes Lord**. She was not going to challenge the special role of the Jewish people. She simply thought that since the Lord was a generous, compassionate master, a little kindness could be spared for a harmless pet. While the Jewish people had the primary place seated **at the table**, surely, the woman reasoned, the people of other nations could seek to come under the table, as secondary believers. Again, she showed her humility; hers was not a presumptive faith. Yet, the woman was, indeed, wanting the gifts of God that he had provided for the house of Israel.

Finally, what she believed about Jesus was apparent in her response to his last rebuff. She truly saw in Jesus, one who could freely bestow his kindness, which was without limit and could not be exhausted. He was **the master at the table** who had provided the good things for his people. Master is literally **Lord** κυρίως, and though sir or master are good translations, the deeper meaning was probably in her mind. As the Son of David, Jesus was for her the king of the universe. What she claimed by faith, again showing her humility, were **crumbs** ψικίωv, left-overs from the generosity of the Lord. The Canaanite woman was not claiming equal rights or wanting Jesus to change his plan of ministry, but to receive some of his attention.

Jesus had rebuffed the woman three times and in the end she outwits the Lord, though one gets the impression this is what he wanted her to do.

Verse 28

Then Jesus announced to her, “Dear woman, your faith is profound. Be it done to you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Our Lord Jesus put her faith on a par with the faith of his own people and even higher because he called it **great**. Now interestingly, **her faith** was directed at him. He should have, if he were

simply an ordinary rabbi or Jewish believer, pointed her to God as the object of her faith. But he accepted the Messianic title and now says that her faith was right and the best when she trusted in his compassion and his power to heal. She looked to him as the Saviour and was told by him that she had acted correctly.

He then dispensed divine **healing**. Though separated by some distance from the woman's daughter, the girl becomes instantly better. He truly acted as God, who is unseen, in a spiritual realm, unpenetrable by anyone yet reaching people with his grace, love, peace and healing. And this grace was dispensed immediately, **at that very hour**, and unmediated by touch but simply pronounced through the word; clearly this word was God's word.

(The Lord banished all racial differences. We create barriers even by words such as non-Christian or atheist. Often a label can create a feeling about another. But the Holy Spirit works on all who look to Christ and put their trust in him.)