

“Faith of a Canaanite”

Devotional Reading: Psalm 61 **Background Scripture:** Matthew 15:21-28

Matthew 15:21–28 (NIV)

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.

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To summarize Jesus’ encounter with a Gentile (Canaanite) woman.
- **Biblical Principle:** To understand Jesus’ mission.
- **Daily Application:** To be persistent and bold in our prayers to God.

LESSON CONTEXT

The events leading to the Scripture text reveal the intended expansion of the gospel message. Jesus practiced His teaching by going into Gentile territory. He left Israel and withdrew again, this time into the area of Tyre and Sidon. The Gentiles were “unclean” as far as the Jews were concerned. In fact, Jews referred to the Gentiles as “dogs.” That Jesus would minister to Gentiles was no surprise (Matt. 12:17-21), though at that time, the emphasis was on ministering to Israel (Matt. 10:5-6). As Jesus’ ministry in Galilee drew to a close, it became evident that His people would reject Him and His mission (see Matthew 13:53–58). His disciples often times failed to understand His teaching (15:12–20). Even the religious leaders were offended by Jesus’ message (15:1–9). The people most expected to accept Jesus and His mission failed to understand. Mark 7:24–30 is a parallel account of Matthew 15:21–28.

As you read the lesson, consider which character in the story with whom you most identify. Do you align with the (outsider) woman or the (insider) disciples? Either option will affect how you view God’s gracious and generous blessings.

First Request: Matthew 15:21–24

Matthew 15:21 is not the first time Matthew’s Gospel states that Jesus went from one area to another (compare Matthew 4:12; 12:15; 14:13). After He confronted the religious leaders (15:1–9), He departed from their midst.

Jesus frequently *withdrew* from crowds of people so that He could pray in solitude (examples: Matthew 14:23; Luke 5:16). He also removed Himself from those who might misunderstand His ministry (example: John 6:15).

In today’s lesson, Jesus left Israel and withdrew again, this time into the area of *Tyre and Sidon* (outside of the country of Israel). Tyre and Sidon were two prominent cities located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea north of Galilee, in the region that is modern-day Lebanon.

1. Where did Jesus travel to next? Why? (Matthew 15:21)

What Do You Think?

How do you decide whether or not to withdraw from a situation for your own spiritual, physical, or emotional health?

Digging Deeper

How might the example of Jesus help inform your decision? (Mark 7:24).

Jesus was trying to remain hidden (Mark 7:24), but somehow this Canaanite woman heard where He was and came to Him with her need. Matthew describes her as being *of Canaan*, but Mark is more specific, noting that “the woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia” (Mark 7:26). The Canaanites were an ancient people who had settled in Palestine before the arrival of the Israelites (see Exodus 3:8). During the time of the ancient Israelites, the Canaanites were considered the enemies of Israel (example: Deuteronomy 7:1–6). Their descendants became the Phoenicians—people living in the regions of Tyre and Sidon. This woman was certainly not of Jewish heritage, and her ethnic background would have been seen in a negative light by most first-century Jewish people (compare Acts 10:28).

2. Who came out to meet Jesus? (Matthew 15:22a)

The woman approached Jesus as “Son of David.” Because this designation reflected a uniquely Jewish expectation, it is shocking that a Gentile woman used it about Jesus. She would have been the most unexpected person to recognize Jesus as the long-awaited descendant of David. Before this event, some people had questioned whether Jesus was the Son of David (Matthew 12:23). This woman spoke in a way that reflected her genuine belief about Jesus’ identity and mission. Next, the woman’s cry for *mercy* resulted from seeing her daughter suffer demon possession. Neither Matthew nor Mark describes the daughter’s symptoms. Others who experienced demonic possession also experienced physical disorders (examples: Matthew 9:32; 12:22). Therefore, we can assume that the daughter suffered similarly.

3. How did the woman address Jesus? What request did she make of Him? (Matthew 15:22b)

What Do You Think?

What steps can we take to increase our faith in God before we see Him act?

Digging Deeper

How do cautionary admonishments, such as that of Luke 12:22–23, help inform your answer?

Jesus was silent. Of course, He knew her heart, and His silence could also be considered a test of the strength and quality of the woman’s faith. Jewish teachers and rabbis sometimes tested their students, and Jesus was no exception (examples: John 5:6; 6:6). The strategic silence created space for the woman to continue talking and explaining her desires.

The woman had become a nuisance to Jesus’ *disciples*. They did not address whether they thought Jesus should grant her request. Instead, the disciples wanted the woman out of their midst. Did they not think she was worthy of Jesus’ aid because she was a Gentile woman? (compare John 4:9).

4. How did Jesus respond to the woman’s request? (Matthew 15:23)

Jesus did not send the woman away as His disciples requested. The text is unclear regarding whom He *answered*. If His answer was directed at the disciples, He was reminding them about the mission for which His heavenly Father had *sent* Him (Matthew 10:5–6).

Jesus' primary mission before His resurrection focused on *the people of Israel*. They were like *lost sheep* without a shepherd (examples: Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; Ezekiel 34:5–6; Zechariah 10:2; Matthew 9:36). As a result, Jesus came as a shepherd for the people. He provided spiritual care and guidance, like a shepherd caring for sheep (see Ezekiel 34:23; Luke 15:1–7; John 10:1–18, 27–30).

Central to Jesus' mission as a shepherd was His preaching on the need for repentance and the presence of God's kingdom (Matthew 4:17). This mission was first revealed to the people of Israel. God's blessing would be offered first to them. Then through them would blessing be available to all peoples (see Genesis 12:1–3; Isaiah 49:6–7).

To be clear, Matthew's Gospel is not conveying an anti-Gentile sentiment. Old Testament prophets proclaimed that the Messiah's mission would include Gentiles (examples: Isaiah 19:16–25; Hosea 2:23; Zechariah 14:16). With a few exceptions (example: Matthew 8:5–13), Jesus' earthly ministry focused on the people of Israel. He acknowledged that His mission would reach Gentiles (see 24:14; 25:31–33; 28:19–20).

5. What did Jesus acknowledge concerning His mission? (Matthew 15:24)

Second Request: Matthew 15:25–28

The woman did not debate Jesus on the direction of His mission. Instead, she sought relief in a way that could only come from a desperate mother. She knelt humbly before Jesus and said, "Lord, help me!"

Jesus responded with a metaphor to the woman's request for help. The statement highlights that the *bread* is given to the children of the household first and foremost. By *children* Jesus means Jews, and by *dogs*, Gentiles. Jesus' attitude was intended to test the woman's faith. Jesus is not angry with her but is trying to teach the disciples a valuable lesson. Having been rejected by the Jews, He now turns to the Gentiles, a move that will later shock some of His followers. He had healed Gentiles earlier, but here in Phoenicia He does not want to give the impression that He has totally abandoned Israel. The term for dogs (Greek *kymarion*) means little dogs (pets). It is inappropriate for sustenance to be handed out *to dogs* when it would deprive the children.

In this statement, Jesus highlighted expectations regarding the order of the mission of God. Some Jewish people considered that the Messiah's mission came first and foremost for the people of Israel. Therefore it would have been inappropriate for Jesus to do anything concerning this Gentile woman.

6. What was the metaphor used by Jesus to respond to the woman's repeated request for help? (Matthew 15:25-26)

The Gentile woman accepted that Jesus was sent to Israel (Matthew 15:24). But she did not accept that He was *exclusively* sent to Israel, and she did not take Jesus' answer as a *no*. Instead, she built on His words, pointing out that *the dogs* did not have to take food from children in order to receive the blessing of *the crumbs*.

She immediately seized on His illustration about the children's bread, which was exactly what He wanted her to do. We may paraphrase her reply: "It is true we Gentiles do not sit at the table as children and eat the bread. But even the pet dogs under the table can eat some of the crumbs!" What a tremendous testimony of faith!"

7. How did the woman respond to Jesus' statement? (Matthew 15:27)

We cannot but admire the patience and persistence of this Gentile mother. So did Jesus! It was this faith that Jesus acknowledged, and immediately He healed her daughter. It is worth noting that both of the persons in the Gospel of Matthew who had “great faith” were Gentiles: this Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-13). This Canaanite woman knew what could be hers, even as a Gentile and, thus she became an illustration of millions of Gentiles who would later be blessed by the Messiah of Israel!

8. What did Jesus say and do regarding the woman’s faith? (Matthew 15:28)

What Do You Think?

How will you exhibit great and persistent faith in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to address possible roadblocks that challenge your faith?

CONCLUSION

Great Faith for God’s People

The woman in the lesson was the ultimate “outsider” to a first-century Jewish audience. She was aware of the biases against her. The deck would be stacked against her if she approached a Jewish teacher. Despite that awareness, she came to Jesus anyway. Her desperate situation and her suffering daughter necessitated a bold act.

The woman’s behavior revealed a persistent and great faith. As a result, she received mercy from the Son of David. She was considered an “outsider” to some people, but she was an “insider” because of her life of faith.

This Scripture text invites us to desire a life of great faith. What blessings do we fail to receive because we limit or misplace our faith? A life of great faith requires steadfast confidence that God will show mercy to everyone. How does your perspective need to change in this regard?

What Do You Think?

To examine your faith, what’s the most important thing you can do to complete a self-examination of your faith?

Digging Deeper

Who will you recruit as an accountability partner to help with that examination?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we are grateful to be part of Your family. Reveal to us the things that prevent us from having great faith. Encourage us when we feel unable to show persistent faith. Give us eyes to see people we consider “outsiders” so we can invite them to experience Your great mercy. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Live by great faith!

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week’s lesson is “**Justified by Faith**” and summarizes Paul’s teaching on salvation by faith in Christ’s sacrifice, not by works. Study Romans 3:21-30.