

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

A Misconstrued Episode

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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I recently ran across a video in which a clergywoman from a progressive church preached her view of the incident in Matthew 15:21-28. You can also find it in Mark 7:24-30. So if you want to start flipping to Matthew 15, please do. We will be there in a few minutes. But in that incident in Matthew 15 and Mark 7, a Canaanite woman begs Jesus to cast a demon out of her young daughter. And after some back and forth, Jesus praises her faith and heals her daughter, casts the demon out.

The problem, according to this left-wing mainline Protestant preacher, appears in the back and forth, the interplay between Jesus and this woman. Now, her take on the situation is that Jesus, being far from sinless and perfect, which is contrary to such scriptures as II Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15, and I Peter 2:22 (you do not have to get those, I guess you can trust me that it says that Jesus was without sin. Anyway, she says that He was not perfect, He was not sinless, but a hateful racist who was forced to admit His deep prejudice against Gentiles and women. And when she gives her "gotcha" statement, He has to heal the woman's daughter to make up for His bigotry. That is what she was preaching to her church.

Now, such is the state of Scripture exegesis in post-Christian America. In fact, her explanation is not exegesis. That is probably a word you do not know very well, but exegesis means a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, and it is usually a text of Scripture. And the emphasis of this word, or the emphasis of the interpretation, is upon drawing meaning out of Scripture. That is why it is exegesis. Ex means out from or out.

So what this progressive theologian is doing, is eisegesis. It is an actual word, it is a Greek word, but eisegesis is personal interpretation of a Bible text using one's own ideas, that is, reading one's belief into the text so it says what you want it to say. So, if you know your Greek prepositions, ex means out, eis means into, and that is the difference between the two words.

Exegesis is reading something out of the text of Scripture and getting meaning from it. Eisegesis is putting your own ideas into it, so it says what you want it to say.

But eisegesis actually is a very devious and popular way of doing things in the mainline Christian world these days. I mean, you probably heard some of these things before, but when you have Oprah Winfrey talking about following your own truth or making your own truth, then you can understand what it means.

So today, we are going to consider this section of scripture in Matthew 15 and Mark 7. It was a scene during Jesus' ministry in which He had to deal with a Gentile woman, and how He handles it is very important. But we are going to interpret it from the Bible as best we can. In this way, I think we will see more clearly what God wants us to get out of it, rather than force any kind of human ideology into it. It is always much better to do that—to learn from God rather than try to tell Him what He means.

Let us go to Matthew 15:21. And we will be going to Mark 7 directly after this so we can read these side by side.

Matthew 15:21 Then Jesus went out from there [He was in Samaria, and or the Galilee] and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

Actually, He was probably in Galilee rather than in Samaria, but He had gone through Samaria to get to Galilee.

Matthew 15:22-28 And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon possessed." But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "True, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from

their masters' table." Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Let us go then to Mark the 7th chapter, verse 24, and we will read Mark's version of the same passage, or the same situation.

Mark 7:24-30 And from there He arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden. For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. The woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. But Jesus said to her, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs." Then He said to her, "For this saying, go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter." And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed.

All's well that ends well.

Now we need a little background, a little context here. The exorcism occurred soon after three events. The first is the feeding of the 5,000, which, if you would go back, you could see that the feeding of the 5,000 happened in the middle of chapter 14. The second one was His dispute with the Jews about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. That is not in Matthew, it is in John 6, but that incident slots in here at about the same time. And third, chapter 15 shows His castigation of the Jews for elevating their own traditions above God's commandments.

Notice that all of these have to do with eating" feeding the 5,000, eating His flesh, and the elevating of their own tradition above God's commandment started out with the Pharisees talking about why do Your disciples not wash before they eat. So it is all in the same thematic motif. Just put that in the back of your mind here.

So what had happened was that, because of the things He had said to the Jews, particularly in John 6 and also in the first part of Matthew 15, they were not happy. And so Jesus decided that He needed to get away for a while to let things cool down.

Here in Matthew 15:21, He went out from there and departed to the region. That verb departed, the Greek underneath that verb departed actually means to withdraw, frequently in a sense of avoiding danger. So He wanted to get away from the Jews just to make sure that they did not speed up the timeline unnecessarily. He was not ready yet. This was still the middle of His ministry. He needed more time to finish His job that He had been sent to do. So He did the smart thing and got out of town so that things could calm down a bit.

In order to do this, to not be among any Jews, they traveled to the majority Gentile area near Tyre and Sidon. This was, as we have seen with some of the words here—Tyre, Sidon, Syro-Phoenician, Greek (actually that word Greek should probably be Gentile—but both Matthew and Mark are telling us that this is a majority Gentile area. He did not need to worry about seeing too many Jews around there and sparking some sort of riot or other problem.

So what we get from this is that He did not go there to the Tyre and Sidon area to preach or to heal at all. Perhaps He decided that not only was this a time to rest a little bit, but He could also use the time to instruct His disciples. He would get them fairly alone and undistracted from other things going on around them, and He would have the time to teach them.

We could say that He took *refuge* in Tyre and Sidon. We use the term a lot today. It has become popular to have a retreat where one goes off for a few days and takes it easy. Maybe you go with your fellow employees on a retreat and you are there together and you have a little fun, but you also learn some of your duties at work. That is kind of the idea of what Jesus was doing here. It is about as close to a vacation as Jesus took. Let us just put it that way.

Let us look at verses 22 and 23 here in Matthew 15.

Matthew 15:22-23 Behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon possessed." But He answered her not a word, and His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us."

We have this one Gentile woman. She is specifically named, or identified as a daughter of Canaan, a descendant of Canaan. And just also put this in the back of your mind: what is being set up here by Matthew, who is writing particularly to Jewish people in his gospel, is that he is bringing up the image of the Israelites versus the Canaanites. This idea, when they came into the land as the children of Israel, the ones they had to kick out were the Canaanites. So you have this dichotomy here between the two of them, these two groups. And it is kind of just a passing suggestion—she is a Canaanite—but he wants that idea in your head as you read further.

But this Canaanite woman knew who He was, and believed. So we have this idea of a Canaanite as opposed to a Jew or an Israelite. Jesus had just come out of a Jewish-controlled area where He had been beset by contentious Jews who do not believe, and so He leaves for a Gentile area and finds a Canaanite who believes. It is totally the opposite.

She not only believes, she calls Him Lord, which is master. And she also calls Him, surprisingly, Son of David. She knew who He was. She knew His lineage, and this may even mean she believed He was Messiah, because that is the term for Messiah, Son of David. It is all through the Old Testament.

Notice her attitude here. She asked for mercy with great humility. She is asking very deferentially, very differently from how the Jews treated Him. And she comes to Him as unworthy. She is not demanding. She has the correct attitude, the very opposite of what He had had to face just in the recent past.

Now she shouts out to Jesus here to heal her young and cruelly demon-possessed daughter. The sense is that she was very young, still an adolescent, and this demon was just making her and her mother's life miserable. And the

idea here under severely is either cruel or wicked. She was cruelly demon-possessed or wickedly demon-possessed. So it was obviously something that was disturbing their home life, and this Canaanite woman seems like she was fearing that this would eventually kill her daughter. So she was in earnest.

But you have all of this going on—a deeply humble and earnest believer with a terribly mistreated demon-possessed daughter—and what does Jesus do? He answers her not a word. So you have to ask yourself why. Why did He not answer her? Why did not He say, Oh, poor woman, come on in? But He does not.

Now, if we would go to Mark he says that He entered a house and wanted no one to know it. He was seeking privacy. He had gone there to get away, and this woman was disturbing that privacy. So He kept silent.

Mark says, to this fact that He kept silent, He could not be hidden. Everybody knew, or somebody knew, or it was just very obvious that He was there. He was the Son of God. He attracted a lot of attention, and word gets around, and, you know, somebody knew that He was there and pointed this lady in the right direction.

But what I think His silence is here is something Jesus used a few times, and that is, His silence is a delaying tactic. He lets things proceed to see what happens. He could use it to test His disciples, and He could use it to test the woman, just to see how things would go naturally without Him interfering.

If you will remember, when Lazarus died, He waited two days before doing anything. That is in John 11:6, and His disciples were aghast! "He's been dead! Why didn't You go see him?" And He tells them that He did that in order to glorify God. Maybe He was doing that same thing here.

Now the woman keeps crying out for a long time. The verbs here are imperfect. It means she kept crying out and continued crying out. She was not letting up, and actually the verb here for the "disciples urged Him, saying," is also imperfect. So they asked Him repeatedly to send this woman away. It is like, "Jesus, Jesus, help me, help me." "Come on, Jesus, either do

something or send her away." "Jesus, Jesus, help me, my daughter is demon possessed, please help me." "Oh, Jesus, come on, send the woman away. This is too much, it's frustrating."

Their words here at the end of verse 23 can mean give her what she wants and send her off. And let us just speak to that clergywoman: if anyone in this episode displays bigotry, it is the disciples, not Jesus. They may have had some of the traditional Jewish prejudicial attitude toward women and Gentiles at this point, but Jesus does not. He does not have that kind of prejudice. He just remains silent. And as I said before, His silence, I think, is more of a test of their attitudes—His disciples' attitudes—than an affront to her. He heard her.

Now, verse 24 here is the key to understanding all of this. The whole episode hinges on this, and in the chiastic structure of the passage, this is right about the middle. Yeah, actually it is the 4th verse in an 8-verse passage. It is right in the middle.

Matthew 15:24 He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

This is Jesus' central principle teaching, right in the middle of this story. Now, note that in the way Matthew structures this, Jesus' words are a direct response to the disciples' comments, their complaint. So it is, "Send her away, for she cries out after us," and Jesus says, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He was answering their complaint as to why He was not responding.

Now, the woman may have heard this—as a matter of fact, it is probable that she heard this—but it was not addressed to her. It was not addressed to any crowd that may have been forming because of hearing her shout this at Jesus, you know, 92 times. You would expect that in villages of the day.

What Jesus is doing, though, is answering their impatient and impudent, unasked question: Why have You not done something about her already? And His response lays down a foundational truth about His mission. He was very focused on what He had been sent to do.

And so what He said to them was, the Father has sent Me to preach the gospel specifically to the lost, or we could say the alienated Israelites, not Gentiles. His priority was Israel. His ministry to the Gentiles would occur later, in good time.

Now, this is God's pattern. God has always worked this way. He reveals Himself and His way in stages, normally doing this revelation with one man, and then He expands from there. So from the time of Israel's slavery in Egypt throughout the rest of the Old Testament, He worked with one nation, Israel. And He only worked with that one nation, well, if you count Judah, Judah and Israel are separate nations, but they are all Israel.

In the New Testament, He does not open His work to the Gentiles until several years after the resurrection. There was a specific time and a specific way that He was going to do that, and He did it at the perfect time, because that was His way, that is the way He works, and He wanted to stay in that mode.

Now, we do know that in several other places throughout the gospels, Jesus met with Gentiles, and He usually helped them. But usually there is also a little bit of resistance because they are Gentiles, and His job was to go to Israel.

So, in the vernacular, we could say that Jesus' response here in verse 24 is, "Helping Gentiles right now is outside My core mission. The woman is asking for My help before the time." Remember, He has everything planned out well in advance, and He was working with Israelites right now, at this time, not with Gentiles. We could say even more vernacularly, she is jumping the gun, she is cutting in line.

Now, He does not say this to condemn her, but it is a plain statement of fact that her request was outside the limited parameters of His ministry. You remember, He always did what the Father told Him to do. He did not go beyond the bounds of what the Father had given Him, and generally, at that time during His three and a half year ministry, He was to preach the gospel to the lost among the sheep of Israel. That was His job, and He was reminding the disciples of this.

Let us go back to Matthew 10. He had told them specifically, just a little time before, that this was His job, and this was their job, to concentrate on Israel. This is verses 5 through 8, this is when He is sending out the Twelve.

Matthew 10:5-8 These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying, "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. [Same phrase.] And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give."

So He was reiterating to them that their mission—His mission—was to Israel at this time, and He was not going to be distracted or pulled into doing a ministry to Tyre and Sidon.

You have to look beyond this. He does this work for her, this wonderful healing, and what does that do to all the other people who have sick relatives, or want to hear what He has to say about this, that, and the other thing? He was there to retreat from His mission for a while, to get the energy to go back in and face the Jews again, His true mission.

Let us go on. Now, saying this principle that His job was to Israel at that time sets a high bar for this woman, this Canaanite woman, to jump over. It is actually a test of her resolve, and makes her show her faith, makes her show that her request is a worthy one that He should fulfill.

Verses 25 to 27, back in Matthew 15.

Matthew 15:25-27 Then she came and worshiped Him, saying [oh, look at that, then she came and *worshiped Him*, saying], "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said to her, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "True, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table."

Now, this is the truly controversial part of the entire passage. We are not sure how she suddenly gains an audience with Him. My guess is that, after saying

I'm going to Israel, He said, Let her in, let her in, we will be private about this.

So she was able to speak to Him, and as soon as she came into His presence, she hit the floor and worshipped Him, bowed down to Him. And, of course, begs, repeats her request here, begging for help for her little daughter. She shows immediately the proper attitude for beseeching God for His aid. She is very humble. She worshipped Him. She shows that she knows who He is and how worthy He is of worship. She does not demand. She asks as humbly as she can. This woman, this Canaanite woman who should not know a thing, who should not be this far advanced, is doing everything right.

Now, Mark's rendition of Jesus' response to all this goes better with His words in Matthew 15. I do not know why Matthew left out part of what Mark wrote—if Mark was indeed the first one to write, or whether he was remembering it just slightly differently—but he says this: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." In Mark 7:27, "Let the children be filled first." Remember, He talked about the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and He says,

Mark 7:27 "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs."

This is why I think Mark's response here fits better with what is said in Matthew, but that is not how it has been given to us. But reading them together helps to solve the problem here.

He is telling her, in this metaphor of the children and the dogs, that she is asking for something that has been designated for others at the time. The bread, notice that it is bread, is given to the children, the children of Israel, God's children, as it were. We could say, in the vernacular again, He is saying, "Why should I give you a blessing intended for others?"

Now, Jesus' response here about the children and the little dogs is not intended as a statement of inequality between them, which is how modern people take it, but of timing or priority. He is establishing a difference in the imagery to show that, in the proper sequence of things, in the proper way things happen, children in a household have priority over pets, or priority

over their working dogs. Maybe it is a shepherd's house, and they have got a sheepdog. That shepherd is going to put his children above that dog every time.

So let us unpack this just a little more. I mentioned that what is being eaten here is bread, and bread has been a theme in the past several vignettes here in Jesus' ministry. Well, what is this bread? Well, we find that out in John 6:

John 6:35 "I am the bread of life."

He is speaking about Himself here, and we could extrapolate that He is also speaking about His teaching. But when we think of it as Jesus as the bread that the children are being asked to eat, or being offered, maybe that is a better way, offered to eat, we are talking about a whole range of things that can be understood under this image. That He was offering them His time. He was offering them His attention. He was offering them His instruction. He was offering them His care in healing and casting out demons and all these other things that He would do for them.

So He is telling her, "Should I give Myself to My own people, or should I give Myself to you, whom I do not have a relationship with?" Now, Jesus' words are clearly not meant by Jesus as a slur, but He is giving her a metaphor that she could understand. You could even call it a parable or a proverb.

Jesus was always speaking in parables so people would not understand, but His own people would understand. And, you know what, she got it. Her understanding helped to prove that she would be one of His people. She was a long way to being converted at this point. We have already seen that in the way she approached Jesus. So she did not take it as a slur, not at all.

And just as an aside, He does not use the normal term for dogs here that the Jews would probably have used. He uses a diminutive that suggests a little dog, as it says here, or a puppy. Who does not love a puppy? He is making it more endearing than a slur.

But He is saying that, in an ordered household—which she could understand—feeding the children has a far higher priority than feeding the

dogs. It is as simple as that. It does not matter how beloved the pet is or how much work the working dog does, you feed your children first.

And so she takes no offense, and there is no call to take offense for her. Instead, her reply indicates that she understands that the Jewish prophets, or the Jewish Messiah, would be sent chiefly to Jews or to Israelites. Unlike the leftists out there, she accepts reality. She accepts truth. This is the way that God has chosen to work: first through the Jews, then to the Gentiles.

However, she points out that puppies happily lick up whatever little crumbs fall from their master's table. This is another indication that she got it. She said the master's table. She knew who the master was. She had called Him Lord already twice, and Son of David. She understood His parable. She understood what He was getting at.

And, you know what? She made a cogent point, one that He was really happy to hear, because her response, "True, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table." it is a skilled response, using the reality behind the proverb to make a valid spiritual point. What is the point? His ministry was not being done in a vacuum. It was being done in the real world. It was being done to Israel. He was doing the job. But there were lots of Gentiles around, and who could blame her if she wanted to get into, or accept and believe, what He was saying. That she was willing to accept the bread in that form, whatever she could get, even though she was outside of Israel.

Commentator F.F. Bruce calls it "a curiously felicitous combination of ready wit, humility, and faith," what she says there in verse 27. It shows that this woman does not mean to be presumptuous. She knows she is not part of Israel, not one of the chosen people, but she counters, surely there are a few crumbs for the Gentiles. And He could not deny it.

So verse 28:

Matthew 15:28 Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Jesus' reply comes across as astonished praise for her faith. This woman was amazing. He had not seen that kind of faith anywhere, not in Israel. Do you know that the only two people that He publicly praised for their faith were Gentiles? This woman here in Matthew 15, and the centurion in Capernaum in Matthew 8. He had not seen so great a faith in Israel as He saw in that man and that woman.

He certifies for us that she did indeed believe in Him, and she humbly and persistently had surmounted every impediment put in her way, knowing that He would hear her petition and respond with healing. Why did she know that? Because it is God's way, it is God's will, it is His nature. And if she could only get to Him and give Him her request, that He would give it to her. He would give her daughter that healing.

And so Jesus, here, hearing this and seeing her faith, and looking at her persistence and just marveling, sets her up for us as an exemplar of faith. She is an example of letting nothing impede a Christian from putting his or her trust in Him.

She would get to Him, no matter the time, the distance, how remote God may seem, His servants' unhelpfulness and frustration, any kind of delay, questions of acceptability or impropriety, or whatever it was that was keeping her from Him, she was going to plow through it and get to Him, because He could save, and she believed it.

Let us finish in Matthew 7, just a few pages back, verses 7-11. Jesus had preached about this before.

Matthew 7:7-11 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? [He is talking about the mind of Christ here, the willingness of God to give good things to His people.] If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!"

Do you believe that? The Canaanite woman did, and she may not even have heard this preaching. Solomon says in Proverbs 28:

Proverbs 28:1 The righteous are as bold as a lion.

Jesus teaches this principle right here. Do not hang back. Do not think God will not hear you. Do not make excuses for not bringing a need before God. Do not delay one minute! Do not be dissuaded by others in your ears telling you it will not work, or it is not the time, or whatever they say to dissuade you.

Know, like this Canaanite woman, that God is sovereign, and He is a good Father who will do what is best for us. And go in that confidence and ask, seek, knock. As Peter says in I Peter 5:7:

I Peter 5:7 Cast all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.