

Jesus the Savior for All People

Matthew 15:21-31

Introduction

Tricky Passage: Let me be honest (better than the alternative), this week's passage is a little tough (to be fair, there are tough passages, but I'll make sure Evan is preaching those Sundays, like drunk, naked Noah). The beautiful thing about *tough* passages is that they're in the Bible on purpose (God's purpose). If every word is inspired by God, then it's there for a reason. When you know it's there for a reason, you can go diggin and know that you'll find something (I'm not that interested in wondering through fields looking for gold or diamonds, but if I knew for sure they were there, I'd go searching).

Away Game: There were a number of challenges in the early church (e.g., persecution, etc.) but none more pressing than the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. What does a Jewish Messiah have to say to the larger Greek world? How does the New Testament relate to the Old Testament? And how is the church to respond to this influx of Gentiles into its ranks? This story has a lot to say about that through the occasion of a Canaanite woman coming to Jesus.

Plan of Attack: We'll see that this Canaanite woman's problem is our problem. So as we zoom in to look at her, we'll be able to zoom out and look at ourselves.

The salvation that Jesus offers is available to all people and, as a result, we can boldly seek Jesus in our time of need.

* Read vv. 21-31 but *focus on* vv. 21-28.

²¹ And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly. ²⁹ Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. ³⁰ And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, ³¹ so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.¹

¹ ²¹ Καὶ ἐξελθὼν ἐκεῖθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀνεχώρησεν εἰς τὰ μέρη Τύρου καὶ Σιδῶνος. ²² καὶ ἰδοὺ γυνὴ Χαναanaία ἀπὸ τῶν ὀρίων ἐκείνων ἐξελθοῦσα ἔκραζεν λέγουσα, Ἐλέησόν με, κύριε υἱὸς Δαυὶδ· ἡ θυγάτηρ μου κακῶς δαιμονίζεται. ²³ ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῇ λόγον. καὶ προσελθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ἠρώτουν αὐτὸν λέγοντες, Ἀπόλυσον αὐτήν, ὅτι κρᾶζει

1. A Problem Beyond Our Capacity (vv. 21-22)

Geography Matters: ²¹ And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Went from Galilee (Jewish) to Tyre and Sidon (Gentile) *The only time in Matthew's gospel that Jesus went into Gentile lands.

- A **casual reading** of the OT will show that Tyre and Sidon are **ancient enemies** of the Jews. These regions had a long history of paganism and opposition to the Jews. For instance, the wicked queen Jezebel, who incited Ahab to worship the false god Baal and persecuted Elijah the prophet, was the daughter of a King of Sidon (1 Kings 16:31–32).
- The cities for which these regions are named (just northwest of Israel) are on the Mediterranean sea (modern day Lebanon). Their cultures predate Israel being in the promised land. Their seafaring history came with great wealth.

It's crazy to think that Jesus went into "enemy territory" to get away. Think about how bad things must be for him at "home" to go there for his relaxation.

Awkward Encounter: ²² And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out. Not only is this woman in the region of Israel's ancient national enemies, she is described as a Canaanite. The Canaanites are the enemies of Israel. These are the people that Israel was supposed to conquer and drive out of the promised land. They were supposed to separate themselves from the idols and activities of the Canaanites (e.g., holiness). In fact, this is largely what the "holiness" codes were supposed to do (separate the Israelites, mark them as distinct, as God's people).

- Think back to last week (handwashing and ritual impurity).
- To simplify, Gentiles (due to their idolatry and ignorance of Jewish Law) are **impure**.
- This encounter has bothered theologians and commentators for years (mainly because most of us are Gentiles, not Jews). And this was a problem already in the early church (a largely Gentile church).

Personal Problem: and [she] was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." She had a problem bad enough for her to seek a Jewish teacher. She recognized something about Jesus that many others didn't (definitely not the Pharisees and seemingly not the disciples).

- She has a *greater* theological understanding of Jesus than the Pharisees (e.g., Son of David *a la* Matthew 1:1). **She recognized who Jesus really is.**
 - Our acknowledgement of Jesus doesn't change his identity, it changes us! He has always been who he is.

ἔπισθεν ἡμῶν. ²⁴ ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐκ ἀπεστάλην εἰ μὴ εἰς τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραὴλ. ²⁵ ἡ δὲ ἐλθοῦσα προσεκύνη αὐτῷ λέγουσα, Κύριε, βοήθει μοι. ²⁶ ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐκ ἔστιν καλὸν λαβεῖν τὸν ἄρτον τῶν τέκνων καὶ βαλεῖν τοῖς κυναρίοις. ²⁷ ἡ δὲ εἶπεν, Ναὶ κύριε, καὶ γὰρ τὰ κυνάρια ἐσθίει ἀπὸ τῶν ψιχίων τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τῶν κυρίων αὐτῶν. ²⁸ τότε ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῇ, ὦ γύναι, μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις· γενηθήτω σοι ὡς θέλεις. καὶ ἰάθη ἡ θυγάτηρ αὐτῆς ἀπὸ τῆς ὥρας ἐκείνης.

Sincere Request: “Have mercy on me, O Lord. She doesn’t come entitled (e.g., “I’m gonna get my blessing”) but humble. She doesn’t come deserving, but needy. She is not seeking Jesus for her own acclaim or benefit but for her daughter.

- How often do we come to Jesus to get something for ourselves? How often are we only motivated to pursue Jesus for our own benefit rather than the good of others?

Her Problem is Our Problem: Like the Canaanite women we are...

- Outsiders to the people of God.
- Enemies (in our sin) toward God’s plan and promises.
- Helpless in the face of the oppression of the Evil One and the brokenness of the world.

Therefore we can identify with this woman and we can learn from her. And, if her problems are ours, then the grace she finds is also available to us.

2. Persistence in the Face of Discouragement (vv. 23-24)

Silence of God: ²³ But he did not answer her a word. What happens when we’re desperate for the comfort that Jesus promises and he appears to be silent?

- Song: *Silence of God* “And if a man has got to listen to the voices of the mob / Who are reeling in the throes of all the happiness they’ve got / When they tell you all their troubles have been nailed up to that cross / Then what about the times when even followers get lost?” (Andrew Peterson)
- There are moments when God appears silent. Take a note from this woman:
 - His silence does not invalidate his previous promises (e.g., she had heard the gospel of the Son of David).
 - His silence does not equal absence.
 - His silence does not take away from his compassion
 - “And the man of all sorrows, he never forgot / What sorrow is carried by the hearts that he bought” (Andrew Peterson).
 - His silence tests our resolve in the truth of his Word.

“She came to him with unwavering belief in the message she had heard about Christ but he takes an unexpected approach in his response, as though He would cause her faith and confidence to fail and falsify the report she has heard of Him. Upon his silence, she might well think, ‘Is this the kind man I have heard about? It must be untrue.’ Surely He could speak a word and say to me, “I will not have mercy.” But He is as silent as a tree. This is a hard blow when God hides his grace so high and deep.’... But what does this woman do? She doesn’t leave. She sticks to the Word she knows is true. She trusts firmly that His kindness still hides beneath the surface. She will not contemplate that Christ might not have grace for her. **That is what it means to hold fast**” (Luther via Barth, heavily *adapted*).

- His apparent silence does not dissuade her trust. Silence didn’t stop her. The real test of faith is not your joy and perseverance in the midst of comfort and blessing but your persistence in the face of discouragement.

Disciples of Little Faith: And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” If the Pharisees are the hard-hearted legalist, the disciples are the

entitled inner circle. They want Jesus to “send her away.” They are annoyed by her request. Whether that means “give her what she wants” or “tell her to leave” her petitions are bothering them.

- In the end, he didn’t send her away. He actually uses this moment to teach about her persistence. In a pretty clear way, he uses her to show the shallow faith of the disciples
- The followers of Jesus are constantly greeted by one of Jesus’ favorite phrases in Matthew (4/5 occurrences): “O ye of little faith.”
 - Worried about clothes (6:30).
 - Wind and waves (8:26).
 - Sinking in the wave (14:31).
- Their faith is little (ὀλιγόπιστος; ὀλίγος) and this woman’s faith, we will find out, is great (μεγάλη).

Specific Mission: ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Jesus gives another seemingly negative response (but not necessarily). He had sent his disciples to Israel first (ch. 10), and now he seems to imply the same restrictions for himself. But it is true: Israel is the conduit of blessing for the world, the people God chose to send salvation to and through. They have a historical advantage. And Jesus isn’t saying anything untrue. The gospel is for everyone but God has a plan and a means to get it there. There are stages of revelation and an escalating plan for the gospel to go from “Jerusalem and Judea” to “Samaria” and “the ends of the earth” (e.g., immediate mission vs. larger battle campaign; one phase in the larger plan). *Their privilege only makes the rejection of Jesus’ ministry and message, the opposition of Israel’s religious leaders, and the eventual crucifixion of Jesus more stark.

The Final Word?: It’s not the last word on the subject of Israel and the world. We know from the larger context of Matthew, the larger context of the NT, and the larger context of the Bible that the blessings of God and the gospel are for all people who would place their.

- The covenant of God is to Abraham and his offspring, yes, but it is *to be a blessing to all nations, that all the nations of the world will be blessed*. And who are the true seed of Abraham? Those belong to Christ (Gal 3).
- Even in the Gospel of Matthew, we know that the gospel is for the Gentiles too. Jesus’ very family (Matt 1) includes two Gentile women. The only two people commended for their great faith in Matthew are both Gentiles (the Centurion and the Canaanite woman). The Gospel of Matthew, despite having a reputation for its Hebrew style is a very Gentile friendly book. The final marching orders of Jesus are to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28).
- The early church was a largely Gentile Church.

Curious Method: It’s not like the larger Gentile mission is unclear in Jesus’ mind or that he is limiting salvation to only the Jews. So, why does he speak this way to this woman?

- I wonder if Jesus is answering in this way to force the disciples and the woman to consider just what her request entails.
- “Cold print does not allow us to detect a quizzical eyebrow or a tongue in the cheek, and it may be that Jesus’ demeanor already hinted that his discouraging reply was not to be

his last word on the subject. Need we assume that when eventually the woman won the argument Jesus was either dismayed or displeased? May this not rather than been the outcome he intended from the start? A good teacher may sometimes aim to draw out a pupil's best insight by a deliberate challenge which does not necessarily represent the teacher's own view!" (France).²

Persist: Despite the seemingly dismissive and negative responses, **she persists**. We must persist in pursuing God, despite our feelings even when he appears silent to our requests.

- ⁵ And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; ⁷ and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything?' ⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs (Luke 11:5-8).

Don't neglect the daily call of Jesus, the call to persist in our discipleship, to press on. Our gospel identity is not merely a moment in the past but an ongoing reality. We are to "keep asking God, keep seeking God" (e.g., Revelation focuses on persevering, conquering, enduring, overcoming, etc.).

- Persist along the kingdom path. Even when it is dark and God seems hidden, keep seeking him. It is important not to give up. God is glorified when we don't give up. God is glorified when we keep on believing, keep on praying, keep on seeking. **Frontrunning faith is no faith at all.**

Why is persistence a key to our prayers?

- Persistence proves our prayers are not for temporary comfort but because of a significant need. Persistence proves we are not looking for an easy out but seeking the right path. Persistence proves that we go to God for his presence not just for external benefits. Persistence compels us to the true center of prayer, which is not something but someone.
- Persistence deepens our relationship with God and compels us to examine what our hearts really want most.
 - Do you want God's will? Do you want God even more than you want what you are asking for? If not, then for God to grant what you are asking for, even if it is a good thing, might be the most unloving thing God could ever do.
- Persistence demands patience and waiting **which is the ground of spiritual growth**. Because our natural inclination is to use God and not to love God, only frustrations in prayer can purge and purify our desires. **Perhaps God desires to give you exactly what you have asked for, but only in a time and way that the gift can truly benefit you instead of harming you.** Many of us will pray about something for a while and when the answer doesn't come when we think it should or we get a different answer than we like, we throw up our hands in defeat and say "What's the use?" Persistence in prayer molds and transforms our desires, to change how we pray and even what we are

² Cont. "...even if the phrase 'devil's advocate' may not be quite appropriate to this context!"

praying for so that we come to pray closer to the heart of God (e.g., not a diet but a lifestyle; not a program but a priority).

3. Faith in the Person and Plan of Jesus (vv. 25-28)

Who is Jesus?: ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” She continues to approach Jesus with a posture of humility and worship. She calls him “Lord” (a title for God, though not always, but in the context of “Son of David” language it most certainly is divine).

- Her prayer is simple and sincere, “Lord, help me” (like Peter’s “Lord, save me” prayer when drowning, her prayer is one of desperation).³

Harsh Metaphor: ²⁶ And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus answers with another puzzling response. Is he being rude or is he continuing to test? Conventional Jewish wisdom agrees with his approach. And, to be fair, it is wrong to take food from children and give it to dogs.

- How will she respond? What will she say?

Surprising Agreement:²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” When she hears this, “she doesn’t leave but [surprisingly] agrees with Jesus’ apparent judgment and grants that she is a ‘dog.’” And, in fact, she doesn’t want to be more than a dog but simply to receive what a dog receives “to eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table. What a masterpiece! She actually takes Christ at His own words” (Luther via Barth, *adapted*).

- Maybe we should spend a moment and feel the weight of our unworthiness. Maybe we have truly understood Jesus’ words when we feel God rebuke us as sinners and judge us as unworthy of the kingdom of heaven. “Then we feel hell and come to think ourselves eternally lost. Learn here from this woman and capture God in His own judgment and say, ‘Yes, Lord, I am a sinner and not worthy of your grace *but* you have promised pardon to sinners and have not come to call the righteous but the sick” (Luther via Barth, *adapted*).

It is not unusual to receive some criticism in life and in ministry. When someone criticizes my faults as a pastor, I’m quick to remind them that “I’m worse than [they] imagine.”

- The Pharisees and disciples come to Jesus with a sense of entitlement, this woman comes with an admission of her unworthiness (e.g., Prodigal Son; Lk 15; eating with the pigs and knows a servant in the Father’s house is better). If you can only follow Jesus from a position of prestige then you’ll never be able to follow Jesus. #humilityiskey “Faith is acknowledgement of our limit and acknowledgement of the mystery of God’s Word, acknowledgement of the fact that our hearing is bound to God himself... not giving Himself in either case into our hands but keeping us in His hands” (Barth).

- Being in God’s hands (house) even as a dog, is better than anywhere else.
- The disciples thought they were clean (like the Pharisees thought), because of their ethnicity or proximity but neglect the heart of righteousness (i.e., faith in Jesus). God

³ “Help” is the same word used by the Centurion in ch. 8 (i.e., “help my unbelief”).

loves you, he doesn't **owe** you. Everything he gives is grace and everything he withholds is for your good.

The woman recognizes her own unworthiness but that doesn't stop her from seeking Jesus. This is the paradigm of discipleship, prayer, etc. We approach God with humility and unworthiness as well as boldness and faith (e.g., **When do you go to a doctor? When you're sick**).

- In fact, the depth of our unworthiness should increase the boldness of our faith. Weakness not only illuminates the need for strength, it paves the way for strength to be magnified (e.g., "when I am weak, I am strong"). God doesn't work just in spite of our weaknesses but through our weaknesses (**human weakness is a feature not a bug, it's meant to drive us to faith**).
 - Do you feel unworthy? Do you feel broken? Do you feel helpless? Do you feel weak? **Good**. Come to Jesus.

Great Faith: ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

- What makes her faith great? She recognizes Jesus' identity ("Lord," "Son of David"). She approaches Jesus with confident humility, never wavering in her belief that he was powerful enough to help and compassionate toward her problem. Her great faith was evidence of his great love.

Similar to Centurion (8:5-13): In both cases the request comes from a concerned parent. Both are praise for their faith. Their "Gentile" faith exceeds the Jews.

Offer to All: God had made a promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but the promise was for the blessing of all people. A lot of the Israelites of Jesus' time (2T) were relying on their ancestry, their ethnicity, their religious heritage. They misunderstood that the promise of God was always received by faith.

- So the Gentile, the outsider, is welcomed into the kingdom, she has a place of honor, yet many earthly "sons of the kingdom" will be excluded. In the end, the Canaanite woman is not a dog eating the leftovers but a daughter seated at the table.

Faith in the Son of David saves. Your knowledge, parents, good behavior, superstitions, church membership, good intentions, new year's resolutions, charitable donations, etc. won't save you.

- The borders of God's kingdom are open "from the east to the west" and everyone is invited to sit at the table and eat but there is only one key, there is only one path, there is only one way and his name is Jesus.
- "That a Canaanite, of all people, should receive the compassionate ministry of Israel's Messiah is a potent symbol of the universality of the gospel."

Backwards Kingdom: Galilee, which should have been friendly territory to Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, proved hostile. Tyre and Sidon, which should have been hostile to Christ given the history of God's people, is friendlier to Him. In enemy territory, people responded far more readily in faith to Jesus than the Jews did. **It remains true that some of the quickest to trust**

Christ are those whom we might consider the least likely to believe. Such is the wisdom of God.

- The Canaanite woman sees Jesus as the only source of her remedy. She is not blinded by privilege or entitlement. Her outsider position, her weakness actually helps her see more clearly who Jesus really is.
- “God willed that the Jews should be so instructed by [Scripture] that they might turn their eyes directly to Christ in order to seek deliverance...” yet they didn’t, and to their shame.
 - Some have heard, and studied, and read and *yet refuse to trust in Jesus*.

Jesus used the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon to highlight the way God’s chosen people refused Him. The Israelites of Jesus’ day believed themselves to be righteously following God, yet they did not recognize God in their midst.

Conclusion:

- Like the Canaanite woman, we can boldly come to Jesus, knowing that his salvation is available to all, that he is the compassionate Savior of which we’ve heard. Our sin, history, and ethnicity are no barrier to his grace.
- In fact, recognizing sin frees us to seek God.
 - Don’t be like so many in Jesus’ day who had access to all sorts of information and traditions about God yet missed him in their very midst.