

The Day Jesus Was Rude to a Canaanite Woman

I Kings 17:8-16; Mark 7:24-30

(Requested by Keith Garrett)

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I agree with Keith Garrett who requested a sermon on the text from Mark 7. This encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman seems way out of character for Jesus. This is the only occasion in all four gospels where Jesus is even mildly critical or cold toward a woman. Now, he unloaded on some men from time to time, calling them hypocrites, whitewashed tombs, and overturning their money changing tables in the temple.

But not women. Which makes me wonder, why was Jesus so harsh with this Canaanite woman? She threw herself on the floor before him, begging on behalf of her “little daughter” who was possessed by “an unclean spirit.” Jesus responded to this mother by calling her and/or her little daughter a “dog.” Now, for you dog lovers, this was not a compliment. It was offensive. Today if this were to happen, we would say that that kind of language is just plain rude. She was in need, and Jesus called her a dog. Fortunately the woman was undaunted by this offensive remark by Jesus and appears to have won the argument. It seems that she convinced Jesus to do something he did not originally intend to do. This is a really complicated text. Thank you, Keith Garrett! But we will try to unravel it.

It is a complicated text, but it's not a complicate story, though there are some things that are not immediately evident to those of us who read the text 2000 years after it occurred. Mark says that Jesus was trying to get a bit of a respite in the region of Tyre and Sidon. When you read the chapters preceding our text, you see that large crowds had begun to follow Jesus. He had tried to get away from all the activity and people, but 5,000 people followed him into a remote area. The people didn't think to bring food, of course. So when they became hungry, Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000. He healed their sick. Everywhere he went people recognized him and clamored for help. Surely he was suffering from what we call today “compassion fatigue.”

Then on the heels of the compassion work, Jesus wrangled with the Pharisees. You can imagine how emotionally exhausting that was. So in the text for today, Jesus was simply trying once again to get away. Mark says that Jesus didn't want anyone to know where he was...there in the region of Tyre and Sidon.

Here's something important that is not immediately evident to those of us reading this 2000 years later. Tyre was a Gentile region. It was actually an island connected to the mainland by a causeway built by Alexander the Great. It was a Gentile city and it was wealthy. Since it was an island, the wealthy residents of Tyre imported their produce from the region of Galilee, where poor Jewish farmers grew the produce. This was a good arrangement most of the time. The wealthy Gentile residents of Tyre got their food, and the poor Jewish farmers had a source for selling what they grew. However, when the rains didn't come on time or other factors reduced the yield from the fields, there wasn't enough food to feed the Jewish people of Galilee and the wealthy Gentile residents of Tyre. The people of Tyre were able literally to buy food off the tables of the peasant Jewish farmers. As a result, the poor Jewish families of Galilee went hungry. They resented the wealthy Gentile "dogs" of Tyre for taking the bread of their children.

Jesus was trying to get away, a popular Jewish figure hid in a Gentile city, when a Gentile woman burst into the home. She was in a panic. Her little daughter, she said, needed Jesus. The woman apparently had heard that Jesus had healed people and fed multitudes. She threw herself at the feet of Jesus, explained that her little daughter was possessed by a demon, and begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Now listen carefully to what Jesus said. This is the statement that is so controversial. "Let the children be fed first," Jesus said, "for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Let the children be fed first. It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to dogs. In Matthew's account of this same event, he adds a statement. Before Jesus said those words, Matthew remembered Jesus saying this to the woman; it is equally controversial: "I was sent *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She was a Gentile. She did not belong to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus was saying that his ministry didn't even include her. He came for those poor peasant *Jewish* farmers in

Galilee, not for her and her rich Gentile friends in Tyre. It wasn't right for him to take what belonged to the children and give it to the Gentiles.

Let the children be fed first. Now some think that this is what Jesus meant by those words: "Let the children *of Israel* be fed first," all the people of Israel. As Matthew remembered, Jesus said that he came only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. So let the children of Israel be fed *first*, Jesus told the desperate mother.

Notice her response. This woman has been called witty, clever, and persistent. I think it's appropriate to call her simply a mom with a sick child who wasn't going to take no for an answer. Prostrate before Jesus she said, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

She took no offense at the slur. She didn't ask for the whole loaf of bread. She said that even the *Gentile* dogs under the dinner table were entitled to eat the crumbs that fell from the plates of the children *of Israel*. In other words, she was saying, *Sir, yes, you may come first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but we Gentiles are people too. Our children and we need the healing grace of God, just as they do.*

Now look at what Jesus said to her. She was a dog, a Gentile, outside the plan of God. Jesus was ready to brush her and her little daughter aside. But after her convincing argument, Jesus said to her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

And Mark concludes the story with these words, "So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon was gone." Matthew puts it this way: "And her daughter was healed instantly."

Keith, I understand why you requested this text. It is arguably the most shocking remark attributed to Jesus in the Bible. Now, what does it mean?

Dr. Alan Culpepper was my New Testament professor when I was working on my doctorate. His expertise at that time was the Gospel of Mark. I'll never forget the last day of class. He came in without saying a word, stood before the class, and quoted the entire Gospel of Mark. We sat in rapt amazement. Then he said, "Class dismissed." Dr. Culpepper says that Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman marked a turning point in his ministry.

With one exception, up to this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus had worked exclusively among the Jews. Dr. Culpepper captured the meaning of this story with this statement: this "courageous and witty Gentile woman may have convinced Jesus that God's mercy could not be limited to the Jews" (*Smyth and Helwys Commentary*, "Mark," p. 242). In her, a mom who would not take "no" for an answer, Jesus realized that the Gentiles were in need of God's love and grace too. Her great faith was honored on behalf of the Gentile world. And if you will notice, immediately after this encounter Jesus fed 4,000 people. But this time the miraculous feeding was on the other side of the Sea of Galilee—in Gentile territory. What Jesus did for the Jewish people, from that point onward he did for the Gentile people also. He gave them all bread. All God's children received the bread of life.

So, what we see in this fascinating story is Jesus' growing understanding of his mission. It wouldn't be only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. His mission would be for the lost people of the world.

Do you remember the song we all learned as children?

*Jesus loves the children,
All the children of the world,
Red and yellow, black and white,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

That's the message of this text. Through Jesus of Nazareth, God reached out to redeem all the people of the world—liberals and conservatives, easterners and westerners, men and women, rich and poor, all the people of the world. There are no dogs, except for the four-legged kind. There are no dogs. And we owe a word of gratitude to a strong woman, a courageous, witty, and persistent mom who wouldn't take no for an answer. Keith, thanks for calling this text to our attention.

Closing Prayer

Blessed Lord, who loves us all, red, yellow, black and white, help us to do so also. Amen.