

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Then Jesus went from that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not say a word in answer to her. His disciples came and asked him, "Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us." ²⁴ He said in reply, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But the woman came and did him homage, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He said in reply, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." ²⁸ Then Jesus said to her in reply, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that hour.

Context

Between the 19th and 20th Sundays in Year A, Mt 15:1-21 are passed over. In order to provide a context let us briefly describe the events which leads us to Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman.

Jesus' three acts of power in Mt 14 (feeding the 5,000; walking on water; and the healings at Gennesaret) are followed by a controversy with the Pharisees and scribes. The specific issue for debate is the disciples' failure to observe the rules of ritual purity/cleanliness as exactly as the Pharisees did (v. 2). The Pharisees had received and built up a body of tradition designed to ensure the observance of the written Law. Their intention were good: if one does not break the traditions then one will never break the commandment/Law and then God will never again punish the people by Exile. The people will remain a covenant people; at least so went the thinking. The Pharisees also saw the special Levitical (priestly) rules as having value and helping attain holiness and so they also wished to extend to all Israelites the rules that originally applied only to members of priestly families on the grounds that Israel is a priestly people. That is the background in Mt 15:2 where they expected Jesus and his followers to observe the rules of priestly purity spelled out in Lev 22:1-16.

The first part of Jesus' response (vv. 3-9) attacks the Pharisees' idea of tradition. Jesus argues that sometimes their tradition leads to breaking the clear commands of the law (vv. 3-6). The commandment about honoring one's parents is stated in the law both positively (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16) and negatively (Exod 21:17). But the Pharisees' tradition, according to Jesus, allows a person to place property under sacred vow as a means of preventing the parents from having access to it. Thus a pious fiction provides the excuse for disregarding and getting around a sacred obligation encouraged by the law. The words of Isa 29:13 are used to brand such behavior as hypocrisy. The tradition that claims to protect the law actually violates it.

The second part of Jesus' response (vv. 10-20) concentrates on the specific issue of ritual purity. The statement in v.11 to the effect that there is only moral uncleanness is very radical, since large parts of the Old Testament law concern ritual uncleanness contracted by touching and by eating certain foods. Only a firm faith in Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the law could allow Matthew and his community to accept such a revolutionary teaching.

To the basic statement in verse 11 are joined a very harsh judgment on the Pharisees (vv. 12-14) and an explanation for the disciples of Jesus (vv. 15-20). When informed about the Pharisees' offense at his teaching, Jesus denies their spiritual roots (v. 13) and condemns them as blind guides leading others to destruction (v. 14). Peter's request for an explanation of Jesus' teaching in verse 15 assumes that "parable" means "mystery" or "riddle." Jesus' explanation in verses 17-20 merely expands and makes concrete the radical statement in verse 11. Moral purity alone is important, and the evil designs of the mind make a person morally impure and issue in the kinds of action forbidden by the Old Testament.

The complaint raised against Jesus' disciples in v. 2 has no validity, because the developed tradition of ritual impurity and purity has no validity.

A Thought or Two. The Pharisees are easily dismissed, after all, they are the antagonist in the narratives. A more optimistic reading of the context is that the Pharisees are the ones who have lost the spirit, heart, and compassion of the Law. There is nothing wrong with wanting holiness to be a goal and desire of all the people. But the assumption that the rules and traditions of the Levites are the path of holiness for the people errs in that it assumes the Levites exist in a hierarchy that places them closer to God. In addition, when one forgets the bases of the traditions and whether they are "t" traditions or "T" traditions, then only problems lay ahead.

But there is the potential Pharisee in everyone of us who relies upon "t" tradition too heavily. What would be the reaction if all the Catholic Churches removed the holy water fonts? The end of faith and time as we know it? Doubtful, but certainly, the pastor who allowed it! What happens at the moment that you reach to dip your fingers into the water of the font and discover the font missing? Do you eventually reach the point where you muse, "Well, it was always there to remind us of our baptismal vows, the one we will renew in the Creed, the ones we received at the beginning of our journey of faith, the ones I remember on this journey today into the heart of the Eucharist." Holy water fonts are wonderful, but are "t" traditions meant to remind you and lead you to the "T" traditions.

And there is the potential Pharisee in everyone of us that presumes upon the "T" tradition in the wrong way. What could be said about the person who comes to Reconciliation every week, confesses the exact same sins, and in between makes no effort in prayer or action to effect change in their life? What is the difference between magic and a sacrament? Some find that a shocking question, but I think it a good one to help uncover one's heart. An anthropology professor once told us that magic is the idea that one can do the exact thing, say the exact words in the right order, all at the right time, and then one controls the power of the gods. "If I go at the appointed time, know the right words (*Bless me Father for I have sinned...*), confess my sins, then I GET forgiveness (emphasis pointedly added)." I have done the right thing with the right words at the right time so I have earned, am owed forgiveness...such is magical thinking or heartless juridical accounting where faith should be.

A sacrament never controls God or God's power, it relies upon the promise of God, and so as we have been told, we ask and believe that what we have asked for is given: *God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.* Forgiveness is mercy from God and is never earned, but only received as gift for the asking. Such is the way of faith.

The Catholic "t" traditions are plentiful and there to help the faith. They are good. It is the Pharisee within that can introduce the merely juridical or magical attitude upon the good.

Commentary

At its core this narrative remains a miracle-story – *And her daughter was healed from that hour.* But as the encounter is placed immediately after a discussion of purity in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus' encounter with this Gentile woman also brings out the implications that the Gentiles will no longer be separated from Israel (cf. Acts 10:15, 28; 11:9–18).

As in the case of the centurion's servant (8:5–13), where also the dialogue takes precedence over the story, the main interest is in the question of Jesus' response to the faith of a Gentile. Indeed the two accounts are closely parallel in many ways, not only in being the only Synoptic accounts of healing at a distance, but in the racial issues involved, with Jesus' apparent reluctance to respond to a Gentile's

request met by the persistent faith which ensures his response in the end. The question raised by 15:1–20 of Jesus' attitude to Jewish ideas of purity, with all its crucial implications for the Gentile mission, is here put to the practical test of a Gentile's desire to share in the benefits brought by the Jews' Messiah.

The Canaanite Woman

Verse 22 tells us that she is from the region of Tyre and Sidon. These were Phoenician cities just beyond the northern border of Israel. The people worshiped Phoenician gods and were not nor had they ever been Jewish. By stating that she is from the region general suggests that she was a rural peasant, rather than a city-dweller. In Jesus day she would have been considered "Syrophoenician" – the term that Mark uses. But to Matthew, she is a Canaanite. Matthew's more Jewish audience may be more aware of the enmity between Jews and Canaanites that had existed since the time of Noah. Canaan was the son of Ham, who saw his father naked (a euphemism thought to mean sleeping with his father's wife). Noah utters this curse in Gen 9:25-27:

Cursed be Canaan;
lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.
Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem
and let Canaan be his slave.
May God make space for Japheth,
and let him live in the tents of Shem;
and let Canaan be his slave."

Even more significant than this ancient curse about being slaves to the Jews, is the promise given to Abraham: "*And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God*" (Gen 17:8). They were part of the people the Israelites were commanded by God to annihilate (Dt 20:17), which Joshua carried out partially as the people of Israel took over their land and cities. These historical events would not make Canaanites very friendly towards Jews nor towards the Jewish God.

Why would this woman approach Jesus? One suggestion is that she had nowhere else to turn. Perhaps she had heard reports about the healing miracles of Jesus. Her need was so great, her concern for her daughter so deep, that she dared cross that rift between Jews and Canaanites. Perhaps she was at the point where she had nothing to lose, and perhaps everything to gain.

In any case her call is striking, not only in its persistence and boldness, but also in its language. *Lord, Son of David*. While "Lord" may be nothing more than calculated politeness, "Son of David" might refer simply to being Jewish, but it raises the question of whether she had heard (and had nascent belief) in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah.

A Framework to Understand the Response

It is believed that the etymology of "Hebrew" comes from the Semitic root '*apiru*, which refers to those who cross over. It is an apt description when one considers the journeys of Abraham and Sarah, the travels of Jacob/Israel and his 12 sons, and the Exodus of the Jews to Israel – a narrative history of people who were "other" and yet willing to "cross over" because of the call of God. And paradoxically, the disciples are not willing to "cross over" to console this woman who is "other."

This "otherness" has to be understood in the context of Mt 14 and the Mt 15:1-20

Why did the disciples cross the lake (14:22)? To get to the other side – but not willingly. What's so important on the other side, that Jesus, literally, "immediately" (*eutheos*) "forces" (*anagkazo*) the disciples to get into the boat and head that direction? When disciples first cross the lake through a storm, they land on the Gentile/unclean side (Mt 8:23-34). With the boat trip of Mt 14, Jesus had sent

them to “the other side” (14:22, see also 16:5), was that meant to be the Gentile side? In Mark, Jesus had sent the disciples to Bethsaida (Mk 6:45), which is in Gentile side of the Jordan, but they don't make it. They end up in Gennesaret (Mk 6:53; Mt 14:34) which is on the Jewish side of Lake Galilee. Can storms at sea (and “little faith”) keep disciples from reaching the destinations where Jesus has sent them? It is a question we can all ask of ourselves and our communities of faith. This issue of “other” and “clean/unclean” is the issue Jesus takes up in Mt 15 (and was addressed in the “Context” section).

The disciples are people learning what it demanded of true discipleship to Jesus. They are emerging from a time in which there is a major holiness movement headed by the Pharisees which is implemented in laws of ritual purity and cleanliness – in which things and people can make you unclean. The disciples are being called into an era in which they are called to “cross over” to all peoples, but not just yet. That commission will become clear in the post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus. For now, it is already clear in Matthew that Jesus and his disciples ministered only to the lost sheep of Israel (9:35–36; 10:5–6).

However, there has already been one notable exception to this rule, the healing of the Centurion's servant (8:5–13). It is noteworthy that both the previous and the present cases of ministry to Gentiles center around exceptional faith (8:10; 15:28). Both cases involve a request for another person, the Centurion's servant and the Canaanite woman's daughter (8:6, 8; 15:22). Both cases also speak of blessing in terms of table fellowship (8:11; 15:26–27), which is then applied to the primacy of Israel. The Roman official may look forward to sitting down at a table with the Jewish patriarchs, and the woman may have scraps of the children's bread. The language of the table is clearly eschatological in 8:11 and is implicitly so here in Matthew 15, since the woman received blessings flowing from the presence of the Kingdom (12:28). The story of the Canaanite woman is, in a way, the preamble to the gentile missions: not yet, but emerging. For now the Israelites are still called to be the light to the nations – and hence the primacy of mission to them.

How are We to Understand Jesus' Response?

The disciples' request, *Send her away for she keeps calling out after us* need not be understood as disapproval of her request, but simply a desire for peace and quiet (cf. 19:13?). In fact, if Jesus would just grant the petition, they all can rest. Many scholars hold this content makes Jesus' emphatic objection (v.24) more cogent. But rather than take the path of least resistance, there is a principle to be highlighted. The principle is the same as that of 10:5–6, of a mission restricted to Israel (during Jesus' earthly ministry): “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*” The statement here is Jesus' explanation to the disciples of his unexpectedly unwelcoming response to a woman in need; she herself need not have heard it, as it is only in v.25 that she approaches Jesus closely.

In her close approach she gives Jesus *homage* and again refers to him as *Lord*. While one can assume this is only the posture/language of the petitioner, in Matthew such language always refers to worship before God. Given this, how should one take the repartee between Jesus and the woman? There are three basic suggestions:

1. One suggestion for understanding Jesus' response is that he is testing her faith (*Lord, Son of David*) and her resolve (a key characteristic for all disciples).
2. Another suggestion is its polar opposite, he is making it clear to her that she and her concerns are not part of his mission – but her clever reply, acknowledging the primacy of mission to Israel, raises the possibility of mission beyond Israel for those who accept God's sovereignty in how He chooses his own people.
3. Another variation depends upon the understanding that Jesus is still in Jewish territory and that the Canaanite woman has come as though fulfilling the Isaian vision of the Gentiles streaming to the Temple Mount (cf. Isa 2:2-4): the Gentiles are to approach God through Israel.

All three responses allow for Jesus' final words (v.28) and the healing desired.

Yet we are troubled by Jesus uttering: "*It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.*" It has been suggested that since the Greek term *kynaria*, a diminutive, i.e., puppy, is an affectionate reference to dogs as pets, that Jesus is not being harsh. While that appeals to our modern sentimentality and manners, it has trouble because of the lack of any such idea in Judaism, or of a known diminutive form to express it in Aramaic. The more likely scenario is that Jesus is expressing the contemptuous Jewish attitude to Gentiles in order to explain why her request does not fit into his mission to Israel. But written words do not convey a twinkle in the eye, the tone of delivery, or other such nuance. Perhaps Jesus verbally conveys the words she would expect, but everything else hints at an invitation to "make her case." And she makes it in a way that conveys her faith.

No-one else receives from Jesus the accolade "...*great is your faith!*" (though the centurion seems equivalent, *cf.* 8:10). Was it merely her persistence in expecting a response despite apparent refusal? Or is there also the idea of her spiritual perception in recognizing *both* the primary scope of Jesus' mission to Israel *and also* the fact that that was not to be its ultimate limit? The Canaanite woman, like the centurion before her, foreshadows the time when the true Israel will transcend the boundaries of culture and nationality.

Universal Salvation

The careful reader of Matthew should be mindful that there have been persistent hints. From the beginning of the Gospel, Matthew begins to make it clear that the community of the Messiah is formed from unexpected sources. The mention of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (1:3, 5, 6), all evidently Gentiles with overtones of scandal in their backgrounds, prepares the reader for Jesus' association with the sinners of his own day. The curious arrival of the mysterious wise men (Magi) from the east who wish to worship Jesus (2:1–2) foreshadows the power of the message of the Kingdom to summon followers in surprising ways. Jesus' amazement at the faith of the Roman officer (8:10–12) and his acknowledgement of the faith of the Canaanite woman (15:28) encourage the readers of this Gospel to believe that the message of the Kingdom is able to engender faith from unlikely sources in their own day. The Roman soldier's amazed confirmation of Jesus' true identity at the crucifixion (27:54) has a similar effect. All of these episodes from the narrative collectively encouraged Matthew's original Jewish readers to expand their vision of the people of God. It was not that they should abandon their fellow Jews, but they were to take the message of the Kingdom to "all the nations" (28:19).

Notes

Matthew 15:21 *withdrew to*: The translation of the Greek *anechoresen eis ta mere* depends on the translation of *eis*. It can be understood as "withdrew in/into/toward the region" It is not clear whether Jesus entered non-Jewish territory or not.

Matthew 15:21 *Tyre and Sidon*: Sidon is an ancient Phoenician city that was never part of the ancient lands of Israel. In the postexilic prophets (Joel 3:4; Zech 9:2), and in the Apocrypha (2 Esdr 1:11) and NT (e.g., Matt 11:21; Acts 12:20), the merism "Tyre and Sidon" serves as a geographical designation of the southern Phoenician territory (*cf.* Judith 2:28: "Sidon and Tyre").

Matthew 15:22 *Canaanite*: The woman whom Mark describes as a Syrophenician (Mark 7:26) is in Matt. 15:22 identified as a Canaanite. No one in the first century used that term anymore; Matthew is deliberately conjuring up memories of the pagans from OT times. ***of that district*:** the Greek expression *apo tōn horiōn ekeinōn exelthousa* literally translates as "out from that boundary came out" – "that boundary" referring to v.21 "*the region of Tyre and Sidon.*" The way the verse is translated raises the question of location. Some hold that Jesus is in Gentile territory; others hold that the

woman is from Gentile territory but has crossed over into Jewish lands specifically to seek out Jesus. **called out**: the verbal tense used indicated that the woman was continually calling.

Matthew 15:24 I was sent only...: This saying may reflect an original Jewish Christian refusal of the mission to the Gentiles, but for Matthew it expresses rather the limitation that Jesus himself observed during his ministry.

Matthew 15:26: the children: the people of Israel. **dogs**: dogs and swine were Jewish terms of contempt for Gentiles. This saying may originally have derived from a Jewish Christian community opposed to preaching the gospel (what is holy, pearls) to Gentiles. In the light of Matthew 28:19 that can hardly be Matthew's meaning. He may have taken the saying as applying to a Christian dealing with an obstinately impenitent fellow Christian (Matthew 18:17).

Sources

- G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007) 54
- Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew* in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994) 335-38
- Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 2000) 320-25
- R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007) 587-96
- R.T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 1*, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989) 248-51
- Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 of *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 234-38
- Daniel J. Harrington, "Matthew" in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Diane Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989) 884
- Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009) 414-18
- John P. Meier, *Matthew*, *New Testament Message 3* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990) 170-73
- D. Turner and D.L. Bock, *Matthew and Mark* in the *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, vol. 11 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005) 211-13

Dictionaries

- David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996)
- Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995)
- Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990)

Scripture

The New American Bible available on-line at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/index.cfm>