

April 28 Lesson 9 (NIV)

Faith of a Canaanite

Devotional Reading: Psalm 61

Background Scripture: Matthew 15:21–28

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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.

Key Text

Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.—Matthew 15:28

Examining Our Faith

Unit II: The Measure of Faith

Lessons 6–9

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How to Say It

BethsaidaBeth-say-uh-duh.

CanaaniteKay-nu-**nite**.

CapernaumKuh-per-nay-um.

ChorazinKo-ray-zin.

DeuteronomyDue-ter-ahn-uh-me.

MediterraneanMed-uh-tuh-**ray**-nee-un.

omniscientahm-**nish**-unt.

PhoeniciaFuh-**nish**-uh.

PhoenicianFuh-**nish**-un.

SyrianSear-ee-un.

ZarephathZair-uh-fath.

Introduction

A. Blessing an "Outsider"

The Rain Gutter Regatta was one of the highlights of my time in Cub Scouts. Competitors built tiny sailboats small enough to be placed in a rain gutter. These boats were human-powered by our blowing on the sails. Competitors risked blowing too hard or at the wrong angle lest they face disqualification.

One year, another boy showed up to the regatta with an unfinished boat that was barely “seaworthy.” It hardly floated, and the boy was upset. My dad noticed the boy’s frustration and offered to help him fix his boat into a more appropriate vessel. After a few minutes of work, my dad turned the barely “seaworthy” vessel into a regatta-winning craft. It even beat my boat in the process.

My dad blessed that boy with generosity. I had difficulty, however, accepting my dad’s actions. I was upset because he had helped a boy I barely knew—a boy I considered an “outsider” to our family.

As you read today’s 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.

B. Lesson Context

The Gospel of Matthew does not explicitly identify its author. The early church, however, attributed authorship to Matthew, a tax collector who became one of the apostles (Matthew 9:9; 10:3). Other Gospels mention this person by his given name: Levi (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27–28), named after one of the sons of Jacob (see Genesis 29:34; 35:23).

As a tax collector, Matthew worked with the foreign occupiers of Palestine: the Romans. During the first century AD, tax collectors were despised by their fellow countrymen (example: Luke 18:11). They were seen as traitors to the Jewish people because they assisted the Romans in taking tax money. They were also held in low regard because they frequently enriched themselves at the expense of others (example: 19:2, 8).

The only other information we have about this apostle is that he was the “son of Alphaeus” (Mark 2:14). The apostle James was also the “son of Alphaeus” (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15). These two may have been brothers, but none of the Gospels make that relationship apparent like they do with other sets of brothers (Matthew 4:21; 10:2; Mark 1:19).

Matthew’s Gospel contains the most quotations from the Old Testament of the four Gospels. The Gospel of Matthew has about 65 Old Testament quotes; Mark has about 30; Luke has about 26, and John has about 16. As such, students frequently call Matthew the “most Jewish” of the four Gospels. It is thought that Matthew intended his Gospel to be received by a primarily Jewish audience.

Although this Gospel emphasized the Jewish context of Jesus’s ministry (see Matthew 10:6; 15:24), its message reveals that the gospel of Jesus Christ was intended for both Jew and Gentile. Matthew is the only Gospel to record the visit of the Gentile Magi (2:1–12). It is also the only one to include Jesus’ commission to his disciples that they “make disciples of all nations” (28:16–20).

The events leading to today’s Scripture reveal the intended expansion of the gospel message. 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 displayed little faith regarding his identity (see 14:22–32). They also 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.

I. First Request (Matthew 15:21–24)

A. Woman's Mission (vv. 21–22)

21. Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

This verse 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).

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. Following the exodus, much of the area was designated for the tribe of Asher (Joshua 19:24–31). But that tribe didn't drive out the inhabitants as directed (Judges 1:31–32). Tyre was about 125 miles north of Jerusalem, with Sidon being an additional 25 miles farther. The cities are mentioned together as "Tyre and Sidon" about 30 times in the Bible.

Because of their access to maritime trade, the cities attained great wealth—especially Tyre (see Zechariah 9:3). However, their prideful leaders had acted unjustly (see Ezekiel 26–28). As a result, the Old Testament prophets strongly condemned the cities (examples: Isaiah 23:1–18; Joel 3:4; Amos 1:9–10).

Jesus mentioned these cities in his indictment of the Jewish towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matthew 11:20–24; Luke 10:13–14). His contrast to the Gentile cities was to make a lesser-to-greater argument. If Gentile cities would have repented from sin and thereby avoided judgment, how much more should the Jewish towns do the same?

The Law of Moses taught the Israelites to avoid following the pagan practices of other people groups (Leviticus 18:3). By withdrawing into the *region* near those cities, Jesus ensured that no Jewish person would follow him into a Gentile region.

Centuries before, this region was the location of two events involving the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 17:7–24). While in the town of Zarephath, that prophet demonstrated God's provision for a widow and resurrected the son of another woman. Perhaps the author Matthew had this story in mind as he wrote his account of the events that occurred to Jesus and his followers.

22a. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out,

The crowds that followed Jesus included people from the region of Tyre and Sidon (see Mark 3:7–8). This *woman* undoubtedly had heard of Jesus and his work because of his popularity, as evidenced by those crowds.

Matthew describes her as *a Canaanite*, 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).

Mark’s Gospel provides other details not given by Matthew. Mark states that Jesus “entered a house” (Mark 7:24). This house was likely not the woman’s (compare 7:30). That Gospel also reveals that Jesus had intended for his presence in that region to be a secret, but “he could not keep his presence secret” (7:24). The fact that Jesus desired secrecy reveals that he did not initially intend for his journey into Gentile territory to be a teaching mission.

22b. “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”

The form of the designation *Son of David* appears 17 times in the Gospels. Matthew’s Gospel contains 10 of those instances. In 1 of those 10, the reference is to Joseph (Matthew 1:20); in the other 9, people use that title about the Messiah (here and 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15; 22:42). Jesus never directly applied the designation to himself, but he did so indirectly (22:42; Mark 12:35; Luke 20:41).

The designation comes from the hope that a descendant of Israel’s King David would someday rule with peace and justice (see 2 Samuel 7:12–16; Isaiah 9:6–7; Jeremiah 23:5–6; Ezekiel 34:23; compare Psalm 110). During the time between the Old and New Testaments, the Jewish people had strong expectations of this individual. They hoped the Son of David would come as a political leader to cleanse Jerusalem (see the nonbiblical Psalms of Solomon 17:22–28).

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.

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.

The way that Matthew’s Gospel presents the woman’s request is notable. She did not explicitly ask Jesus to heal her *daughter*, thus freeing the daughter from demonic possession (contrast Mark 7:26). Instead, the mother desired to experience *mercy* herself. She was likely her daughter’s primary caretaker, and the weight of that work had become an unbearable burden.

B. Jesus’ Mission (vv. 23–24)

23a. Jesus did not answer a word.

Jesus’ refusal to answer the woman might seem cruel, but his silence reflects some cultural differences of his day. At that time, it would be considered inappropriate for a Jewish rabbi to *answer* a woman—and a Gentile woman, no less (compare John 4:9)!

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.

23b. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

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? Or was it how *she was crying out after* them that led to their dismissive attitude? Either way, the disciples tended to want to dismiss people they considered annoying or distracting (compare Matthew 19:13).

24. He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

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 42:1–7; 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).

II. Second Request (Matthew 15:25–28)

A. Great Need (v. 25)

25. The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

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.

B. Greater Priority (vv. 26–27)

26. He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

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. It is inappropriate for sustenance to be handed out *to the dogs* when it would deprive the children. Most of Scripture’s

references to dogs carry a negative meaning (examples: 2 Samuel 9:8; Philippians 3:2). Unlike today's house pets, dogs in biblical times were scavengers (examples: Exodus 22:31; 1 Kings 14:11).

When we read this text today, we might feel that Jesus spoke harshly to the Gentile woman by comparing her people to dogs. But a study of the verses that follow may cause us to conclude otherwise.

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.

27. "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

The Gentile woman accepted that Jesus was sent to Israel (Matthew 15:24, above). 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*.

C. Great Faith (v. 28)

28a. Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith!"

Rarely do we read in Matthew's Gospel of instances when *Jesus* publicly commended someone for their faith (see Matthew 9:22, 29). More often, Jesus challenged people for their lack of faith (examples: 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). It is two Gentiles—this woman and a Roman centurion (8:10; Luke 7:9 [see lesson 7])—whom Jesus proclaims to have exceptional *faith*.

We should not interpret the designation of *woman* to be one of harshness. It could be used as a term of endearment (example: John 19:26).

28b. "Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

There is another parallel point between this story and Jesus' healing of the Roman centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5–13. In both instances, the healing occurred from a distance. The woman's *daughter was healed at that moment*, and the centurion's servant was healed (Matthew 8:13) without Jesus being in the immediate proximity of the ailing person.

Those two occasions and Jesus' healing of the son of a certain official in John 4:46–54 are the only times in the Gospels when a distance healing occurred. Further, all three instances may each describe the healing of a Gentile. As such, these accounts prefigure the apostles' ministry to the Gentiles described in Acts 13:14–52; 17:1–4, 12; etc.

Conclusion

A. Great Faith for God's People

The woman in today's text 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 response.

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 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?

B. 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.

C. Thought to Remember

Live by great faith!¹
