

“Who Let the Dogs In?”

Matthew 15:21-28

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Twenty-five years ago, a group called “Baha Men” produced their hit song, “Who Let the Dogs Out?” With words like “Who let the dogs out? ...Who, who, who, who, who, who,” it is not exactly rich in theology. However, it does have something in common with the biblical text we will explore this morning. Some folks view some other people as “dogs,” as a little less than human. Today our journey through Matthew’s gospel brings us to chapter 15 where we explore verses 21-28. Here the question is “Who let some dog type people into Jesus’ kingdom?” The answer is “Jesus.” I think the Lord has some important lessons for us in this passage. Let’s pause and pray the Lord would enable us to hear and obey His word today.

This passage tells us about an encounter between Jesus and an individual known as “the Canaanite woman.” **Matthew 15:21 And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.** Jesus left His home region of Galilee and headed north. Tyre and Sidon were two cities located on the Mediterranean coast about 30 and 50 miles from the Sea of Galilee. Though some Jews lived in this area, it was Gentile territory, and many people there followed pagan religions.

**Matthew 15:22 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.”** Matthew notes that this gal was a descendent of the Canaanites, the tribes Israel had driven out of the promised land under Joshua. Tradition says she was named “Justa” and Mark 7 tells us she was a native of Syrian Phoenicia. She is not someone for whom most Jews would respect or have much affection.

Yet, she seems to be someone who believes in the true God, the God of Israel. Thought “Lord” might be used to address someone simply out of respect, “Son of David” is a title that belongs only to the Messiah. This woman seems to believe that Jesus is God’s chosen Savior, and thinks Jesus is able to help her daughter who is suffering from demonic possession. A desperate mom wants Jesus to help her little girl.

At this point, we might expect to read, “And Jesus moved with compassion, went and cast the demon out of the girl. And she and her mother lived happily ever after.” That is *not* what happens.

Instead, **Matthew 15:23a But Jesus did not answer her a word.** He seems to simply ignore the woman. But she keeps asking Jesus for help. **Matthew 15:23b And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.”** I am not sure what the disciples think Jesus will do. They probably expect Him to give her some time. But **Matthew 15:24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** His ministry is to the Jewish people, who need to repent and turn to the Lord, not to gentiles like this woman. Yet still this gal doesn’t give up. **Matthew 15:25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”**

Finally, Jesus speaks to the woman, but His words don’t seem very kind. **Matthew 15:26 And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”** We may find Jesus’ words puzzling, but I think the woman understands right away. The bread is the gospel, the good news Jesus is proclaiming and the marvelous ministry He is conducting. But it is only for Jewish people. That is who “the children” are. This means the dogs are Gentile people like this woman.

Ouch!! First century Jews often referred to Gentiles as dogs, yet it still seems kind of strange for Jesus to use that language. But the woman gives a marvelous response. **Matthew 15:27 She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”**

She does not disagree with Jesus’ statement but points out that even dogs get something to eat when the breadcrumbs fall on the floor. **Matthew 15:28 Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! (Her persistence is evidence of that.) Let it be done for you as you desire.” (Matthew adds) And her daughter was healed instantly.**

Mark 7 makes it clear that this is one of those healings that Jesus performed from a distance without ever coming in contact with the girl. When the woman gets home, she finds her daughter healed and the demon is gone. Jesus has indeed granted her request.

Okay, this is certainly an interesting account. But there are a couple of questions the story raises. #1 Did the woman correct Jesus' prejudice? Some feminists argue this story shows Jesus *learning* from a woman. Though He was a good man, they claim Jesus was still stuck in the first century Jewish culture and inherited a bigoted attitude toward Gentiles. He treats this woman rudely because He doesn't know any better. This oppressed but brilliant woman helps Jesus see the error of His attitude and makes Him realize that the blessings of the gospel should extend beyond the boundaries of Israel.

Now, I have to admit that on the surface that scenario seems almost plausible. Almost. A closer look shows that it totally misses the mark. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus was perfectly sinless. Though He was tempted in many ways, Jesus never did anything wrong. He never spoke a wrong word or had a wrong attitude. The type of bigotry some folks imagine in this text would indeed be sinful. Thinking another human being is no better than a dog is never the right attitude.

However, I don't believe Jesus thought that, at all. Instead, Jesus was teaching this woman some important lessons and teaching His disciples and the rest of us who read this story very important lessons. I am confident Jesus intended to heal that little girl even before her mother spoke a single word.

The encounter, however, was a test of faith for that woman, much like the Lord testing Abraham's faith in Genesis 22 by telling him to sacrifice Isaac, and testing Jacob's faith in Genesis 32 where an angel wrestles with Jacob. As in these Old Testament accounts, the purpose of the test is not to reveal to the Lord the extent of this woman's faith, but to show her and all of us that He, God, has granted this woman great faith.

This means that when Jesus initially seems to ignore her and then says His concern is only for Jewish people, it is a way to reveal that her faith will persevere and continue despite an apparent

rejection. Now, this is spectacular, but I think it's likely that if we had been there when Jesus spoke about feeding bread to dogs in verse 26 and could have seen His facial expressions and heard His tone, we would have a bit different impression about what Jesus said.

I think Jesus maybe had a twinkle in His eye and a smile on His face when He said in effect, "You don't really think it is right for me to take what these Jewish children say belongs to them and give it to you people who are called dogs?" Jesus must have been delighted when the woman, rather than arguing, "We are not dogs," or "Yes, we too have a right to the blessings of the Messiah's kingdom," says, maybe with a twinkle in her eyes and a smile, "I'm not asking for the whole loaf, just some crumbs." Folks, it just does not make sense to think this is a story about Jesus overcoming His prejudices. Throughout his gospel Matthew has emphasized the compassion of Jesus. He has already recorded instances where Jesus heals a non-Jew, though this is the first time it happens in Gentile territory. And if Jesus has no intention of sharing the blessings of the gospel with people like this woman, why did He go to Tyre and Sidon in the first place? Verse 29 tells us that Jesus returned to Galilee after the encounter with that woman. He apparently went to this region, a round trip of 75-80 miles, on foot, just to meet her. I think it is a big mistake to think Jesus was ever guilty of prejudice or bigotry.

The second question this story raises is: Who is the gospel message really for? That question is answered very succinctly by the Apostle Paul in **Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.** (Other versions read "and to the Gentile.")

In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, Gentile, non-Jews were mostly Greeks. What we see Jesus doing in our text today is totally consistent with this principle of Jews first, *then* Gentiles. Jesus' responsibility while on earth was to proclaim the good news, the gospel of the kingdom, to Israel, to the Jewish people. It was the Apostle Paul, who 15 years later, would be called to bring that message to Gentiles.

Some folks claim we Gentiles were included as an afterthought or as part of Plan B. They say if the

Jews would have embraced Jesus as Messiah, there would have been no room for Gentiles in His kingdom. I don't think so.

God's promise to Abraham, back in Genesis 12, was that through his descendants, through the Messiah, *all the nations* of the world would be blessed. The Old Testament prophets made it clear that one day God would extend His blessings beyond the nation of Israel. Now, we certainly need to keep in mind what Paul says in Romans 11, that God continues to have a purpose for ethnic Israel and that Jewish people always have a special part in His plan.

Yet, we also must realize that part of the essence of the gospel, part of what makes it good news, is that *it really is for everyone*. **Galatians 3:28 tells us There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** We all have an equal share in God's kingdom. Though Jesus' priority during His earthly ministry was to the Jews, our text today shows that even then, the blessings of the gospel extend to Gentiles. The good news of Jesus Christ *is for everyone*.

Okay, what are the lessons for us today? **#1** We should desire to have faith like this woman, Jesus says she has great faith. I see a couple of aspects of her faith that we should try to imitate. First, like her, we should have "*humble faith*." This woman is content with crumbs from the table. She realizes she is asking the Lord, not for anything "she deserves," but for mercy.

She does not complain that Jesus is being unfair or unjust to her. She simply kneels before Him and asks for help. Folks, in our day, that type of humility is in rather short supply, even in the church. Many of us seem to think we deserve God's blessings in our lives, and we feel terribly cheated when things do not go smoothly for us.

Some folks become almost bitter if they get the stomach flu, thinking, "This is not fair, why is this happening to me? I am a child of the King and a wonderful person." That is not a humble or healthy attitude.

D.L. Moody used to say, "Be humble or you will stumble." He was right. Folks who have an inflated view of themselves often get poked by the needle of reality and quickly become deflated and

discouraged. When people find out they are not quite as wonderful as they thought they were, it can be pretty painful. It hurts when a star high school athlete realizes he is not going to be the next Stephan Curry as he sits on the bench for the community college basketball team.

A lot of people seem to think the key to happiness is to simply have higher self-esteem. I don't think so. I am convinced the key to happiness is to be enamored, not with ourselves, but with Jesus Christ. Reality will cause us to always become more impressed with both His greatness and goodness. Like the Canaanite woman, we should be humble enough to bow before the Lord and gratefully accept the crumbs from the table is that is what He chooses to give us.

Someone once said, "You can tell if you have a servant attitude by how you act when you are treated like one." Friends, we can tell if we have a humble attitude by how we react when we are treated as a servant, or even as a dog. It is not always fun, but it is that type of attitude, that type of humble faith that pleases the Lord and brings joy to our lives.

Second, like the Canaanite woman, we should have *persevering faith*, a faith that doesn't give up. We have seen how even when Jesus seems to ignore her, even when His words appear to indicate rejection, *she doesn't give up*. In fact, every time it seems Jesus is pushing her away, her confidence in the Lord is not shaken, even when she is not experiencing His compassion. That is a faith that preserves, a faith that continues even when it doesn't seem like God cares.

Oh friends, we need that type of faith too. Though sometimes we get the impression that a Christian should always have a close intimate relationship with the Lord, that is not really how it works. Godly Christians sometimes feel as if God has abandoned them. Sometimes they go through periods where the Lord seems distant and cold, and they don't feel His love.

When we read Psalms, we see this happen to David on various occasions. The Apostle Paul felt this way at times. In **2 Corinthians 1:8** he writes "**In Asia we were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.**" When I read biographies, I find many Christian leaders have had these dark times.

But what makes these men and women models for us, is that even in the darkest times they did not give up. C.S. Lewis said he believed in the sun, even when it was not shining.

As Christians we are to continue to believe in Jesus, believe He cares for us, even when we see no visible signs of His love. Of course, in reality, God never abandons any of His people. Like the poem, "Footprints" says, the times when we see only one set of tracks are not the times God has quit walking beside us, but rather the times He carried us.

He allows us, His people, to go through trials so that our souls become stronger and so that we may learn important lessons such as Paul reports in **2 Corinthians 1:9** "**But this happened** (the great despair, where he almost wished for death) **that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God.**"

Friends, no matter what difficult situation you are facing in life, I know one thing: It is not time to give up on God. Maybe you have lost your job, and you don't know how the bills will get paid. Or perhaps your wife has told you she wants a divorce, or someone close to you might have just died, or maybe you have experienced something worse than I can even imagine. It is still not time to give up on the Lord. It is time to turn to Jesus Christ and humbly seek His grace and help.

I can assure you, if you do that you will ultimately, not be disappointed. The Canaanite woman had a humble, persevering faith. May the Lord help each of us to have that type of faith. And friends, if you are having a hard time trusting God today, make sure you talk to me later.

#2...We should share the great news of Jesus Christ with all kinds of people. Friends, today as we saw Jesus take the gospel beyond the borders of Israel, it is a reminder for us to share this message, the great news of salvation through Jesus, to people beyond the borders of our comfort zone.

The gospel is for everyone. Gentiles as well as Jews. And it is for every other type of person there is. Friends, I think most of us would be quick to acknowledge in our heads, that, yes, the gospel is for all kinds of people. But I don't know if we always believe this in our hearts. And to do know that we don't always show it in our actions.

Ninety some years ago, this church made the very important decision to start holding worship services in English, rather than Swedish. Now Swedish was the "heart language" of the people who started this church. I am sure many in the church felt they expressed their emotions better in Swedish as they worshipped. But the church still decided to switch to English. Why? Partly because their Slovenian, Croatian, Italian, and even Finnish neighbors didn't understand Swedish. They realized that part of the reason the Lord had brought them to Chisholm, Minnesota, was to share the gospel with people who were not like them. People who did not speak Swedish. They were beginning to understand that the gospel is for everyone.

Oh, friends, today Americans of Swedish, Italian, Croatian, Finnish and all sorts of other ethnicities worship together in harmony here. Yet, there are still people we sometimes think are outside of the borders of our comfort zone.

We tend to ignore these folks because we don't think they are "our kind of people." For some Christians it is those with a different color of skin. Maybe you wonder why we support missionaries on reservations in Northern Minnesota, because native Americans are not "our kind of people." They are, however, the kind of people for whom Jesus died and whom He has called us to love.

Maybe you think people the housing projects are not our kind of people. But the gospel is for them. Maybe you have decided that folks who are wealthy, successful or well educated are not our kind of people, but they need the gospel of Jesus Christ as much as anyone else.

Friends, we need to remember that if Jesus would have shared the gospel with only His kind, he would not have shared it with anyone. He is the eternal Son of God, perfect and pure. Yet He came to this earth and served human beings who were anything but perfect and pure, so that He could tell us the good news. Jesus then suffered great physical and spiritual agony as He died on the cross so through faith in Him, we might become part of His kingdom. He did that for people who were very different from Him. He expects us, as His followers, to share the gospel with people who are different from us. This means sending missionaries, maybe going as missionaries, to other parts of the world. And it means reaching

out to people in our own community who are different from us.

So, friends, sometime this week, I encourage you to reach out to someone who is different from you. Seek to show them the love of Jesus with your actions and maybe your words. Remember, the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is for all kinds of people. Even for someone you might consider a dog.