

Sermon Matthew 15: 21 - 28

Jesus listens to everyone!

The most dangerous lie that we can believe is that God cannot (or will not) listen to us or care about our needs. Those that say, "*I am not good enough*", "*I am an outsider*" and "*I am unclean*" have fallen into this trap. It is true that we are not worthy of God's attention and help. Some recognize this truth, yet draw the wrong conclusion from it saying: "*I am beyond redemption*".

No, our God is so great that there is nobody this side of the grave that is too far gone, or beyond hope, for his help.

The right conclusion is that we should recognize Jesus as almighty King, kneel before him, beg for his help and believe in his love, mercy and power, by turning to him and praying to him. Because when we turn to Jesus, we turn away from unbelief and despondency. When we come to him, we will see his mercy and experience that he is quick to help and accept us. God responds when we turn to him that he can bless us with his mercy, power and pardon.

The truth is, Jesus will listen to everyone! This is candidly illustrated by the encounter of Christ with the Canaanite woman, as recorded in Matthew 15: 21 - 28. Her faith was so great that she believed that even the crumbs from his table would be enough to heal her demon possessed daughter. And he did!

Our God is in the business of meeting outsiders and granting them not just a crumb, but a place at his table to feast with him.

Jesus seems at first less than eager to help this woman, explaining that his mission is first to the house of Israel. However, Jesus is the one who has left Jewish territory and invaded this woman's world. Furthermore, this Canaanite woman -- an unclean, outsider -- demonstrates that she has a better grasp of Jesus' identity than the hand-selected disciples do at this point in the narrative. **Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman unsettles boundaries and calls into question definitions of clean and unclean.**

Jesus has entered into Tyre and Sidon where the Canaanite woman instantly greets him. It is remarkable that **enough word about Jesus had spread to this region that this woman would somehow know who Jesus is through the testimony of those who had met him.** The text does not say that he performed any signs in Tyre and Sidon before meeting her (see 11:20-24), yet **she recognizes him, not just as a roaming healer but as a rightful King.**

The woman greets Jesus as the "**Son of David.**" Her recognition is all the more remarkable because the disciples have been a bit slow in recognizing Jesus. In Matthew 14, after the

walking on the sea, they do recognize Jesus as the Son of God, but **it is not until 16:16 that Peter declares Jesus as Messiah.**

Yet, this woman hails Jesus as the Son of David, begs his mercy, and requests his power over a demon that has “severely” possessed her daughter (v. 22). **How is it possible that this woman has more insight into Jesus’ identity than his disciples?** She is, after all, an unclean outsider, part of a people who are remembered as an ancient and God-cursed enemy of Israel.

Jesus’ response is, perhaps, the most perplexing piece of this narrative. At first, he does not say a word to her, but he also refuses to send her away. Only after her persistence does he converse with her. **Twice, he explains to her that his mission is first to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** Indeed, the narrative has emphasized that the “house of Israel” has provided Jesus with more work than one Labourer could feasibly handle (9:35-10:6). The need in Israel is indeed great.

The disciples, too, seem to think that Jesus should stay focused on the needs of Israel. They kept telling him to send her away because they are annoyed by her cries for help (15:23).

Perhaps, Jesus’ refusal to listen to the disciples gave the woman hope that her request would be heard?

She does something that is significant in this Gospel: she kneels before him. The author of Matthew uses this action as one befitting a king. The magi, who are also Gentiles, are the first to offer worship to Jesus in this way (Matthew 2:2, 8, 11). For the woman to treat Jesus in this manner is in keeping with her earlier declaration of Jesus as the Son of David.

Kneeling is not only a sign of kingship, but also recognition of power. There is a connection between those who kneel before Jesus and the healings that Jesus performs. *A leper kneels before Jesus and asks to be made clean (Matt 8:2). A ruler kneels and asks for his daughter’s healing (9:18). At the end of this Gospel, when the resurrected Lord appears, the disciples bow before him, and Jesus says that all authority in heaven and earth is his (28:17-18). Bowing in worship also recalls Jesus’ command to worship only the Lord God (4:9) - see 10 commandments Exodus 20.* This woman kneels before one whom she recognizes as having authority not only to sit on the throne of David, but to wield power over evil. And Jesus accepted the honour and respect that can only be given to God!

Jesus’ response to her second cry for help includes a reiteration of his mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He even likens her status as a Gentile to the status of the pet dogs, most probably part of the family life amongst Canaanites, who long to be fed from the table (15:26). (Jesus addressed her within the context of her culture!) In the “house of

Israel” pet dogs were uncommon because dogs were seen as unclean. For this reason they called people such as the Canaanites dogs as well, as they were also considered to be “unclean people”.

The woman, however, is not deterred. **She claims a place in the household, although not a position of privilege or even the position of an insider or one of the children in the household. She accepts the status of a family’s pet dog by claiming that in her culture the pet dog is allowed around the dinner table and enjoys crumbs from the table. In a way, the dog is part of their family life!**

Her statement is striking. **She places hope in what others have discarded. This Son of David has so much power that there is enough power for the house of Israel and more than enough left over for her. She is not trying to prevent his mission to Israel. She just wants a crumb, recognizing that even a crumb from Him is powerful enough to defeat the demon that had possessed her daughter.**

Jesus praises her faith. This woman seems to understand what the members of the household of Israel have yet to grasp. Jesus is not just hope for Israel, but hope for the world.

Her words demonstrate that **the boundary separating her from the house of Israel must be reconsidered. *With a faith so pure, how can she be deemed unclean?*** The encounter with the Canaanite woman prepares the reader for Jesus’ great commission to go and to make disciples of all the nations (28:20).

Reading Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman reminds **the church that God is constantly entering new territory and breaking boundaries.**

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