

Matthew 15:21-39

I. Matthew 15:21-28

In Matthew 15:1-20 we have seen the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees becoming much more intense. These Jewish teachers obviously disapprove of Jesus, and Jesus is very blunt when He calls the Jewish teachers “hypocrites” (v. 7), illegitimate plants that will be rooted up (v. 13), and blind guides of the blind who are destined to fall into a pit (v. 14). So now Jesus has withdrawn from Galilee to the district of Tyre and Sidon – which is thoroughly *Gentile* territory (15:21).

“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’” (15:22). Behold! A *Canaanite*. Remember that in the entire New Testament, this word appears *only* here. And remember that Mark refers to this woman as “a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth” (Mark 7:26). But Matthew, writing for the *Jews*, calls this woman a “*Canaanite*”. In light of Israel’s past history, the term “Canaanite” had come to be shorthand for the enemies of God and all that was unclean and detestable in His sight. So Matthew is obviously using this term for its shock value. A “*Canaanite*” is confessing Jesus as “Lord” and “Son of David” while Israel’s own religious leaders are rejecting Jesus! But as this woman repeatedly cried out for mercy, Jesus “did not answer her a word”. Jesus’ silence would seem to be a very clear statement! After all, this woman *is* a *Canaanite*. But the disciples want Jesus to do *something*! “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” I think the disciples are saying, “Give this woman what she wants so that she will go away. But Jesus answered: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The Apostle Paul helps us to understand this when he says:

- ✓ Romans 9:4 – They are Israelites, and *to them belong* the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.

The Psalmist writes:

- ✓ Psalm 147:19-20 – He declares his word *to Jacob*, his statutes and rules *to Israel*. He has not dealt thus with *any other nation*; *they do not know his rules*. Praise the LORD!

So when the Messiah came, He spent His life and ministry in Israel, not in Phoenicia, not in Syria, or Egypt, and not in any other *Gentile* area. Jesus was sent only to *Israel* to announce the fulfillment of the promises made to *their* fathers – to *Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*. What claim does this *Canaanite* woman have on Jesus? None at all! Jesus is not obligated to heal her because she is not a part of the *covenant* people and because God has *mercy* on whomever He wills (Rom. 9:18). So both in His silence and in His answer to the disciples, Jesus seems to be saying “no”. He will *not* heal the daughter of this *Canaanite* woman.

“*But* she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me” (15:25). *Why* would she do this? What makes her think that the one who has so far only *ignored* her and reminded His annoyed disciples that He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel... *what* is it that *makes her think that this one will heal her daughter?*

“And [Jesus] answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (15:26). The “children” are the Jews and the “dogs” are the Gentiles – that’s clear. But it’s very important that we remember what the bread represents. The healing that this Canaanite woman was requesting was not “just” a *healing*... it was a sign of the presence of the kingdom. It was a sign of *all* the *blessings* of the *Jewish* Messiah’s rule and reign – physical *and* spiritual. So if Jesus were to give this Canaanite woman the healing that she wants, what would that say about her right to participate in all the *rest* of the kingdom blessings? “It is not right”, Jesus says, “to take the children’s *bread* and throw it to the dogs.” If there was ever an answer that appeared to be final, this is it. It’s obviously time for the Canaanite woman to go home. But... she doesn’t. She refuses to give up.

She said, “Yes, Lord, for even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (15:27). She is not offended at being likened to a dog. She knows that as a Canaanite, she has no claim on the Jewish Messiah or the blessings of His kingdom. And so she actually *embraces* the analogy of the dog, and *uses* this *very* analogy to ask Jesus *yet again* for His healing! “Yes, Lord, for even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Instead of begging and pleading, or even flattering and bribing, she actually *counters* Jesus – *using Jesus’ own words*. How can we explain this kind of boldness? Where does it come from? This Canaanite woman is *confident* that in spite of His initial silence, and in spite of His words to the disciples, and in spite of His answer to her... she is *confident* that *in the end* He will prove to be gracious, and favorable, and good. When it seemed like there was every reason in the world to believe that Jesus was saying “no”, this woman’s *faith* enabled her to believe that Jesus’ *final* answer would be “yes” (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).

“Then Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your *faith*! Be it done for you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.” (15:28) This is the *only* time in *all* of Matthew that Jesus calls *anyone’s* faith “great”. And Jesus emphasizes “great” by putting it *first*: “**O** woman, **GREAT** is your faith!” Great is *who’s* faith? Great is the faith of this **CANAANITE** woman!!! What is it that gains for this woman the blessing of the Jewish Messiah and the healing of her daughter? It is not her status as a member of God’s covenant people! She is a *Canaanite*! It is not her desperate begging and pleading as a distraught mother. She actually reasons and “argues” with Jesus. What is it that gains for this Canaanite woman the blessing of the *Jewish* Messiah and the healing of her daughter? It is her *faith*. *Great* was her *faith*.

So what is the lesson here? What was the lesson for Jesus’ disciples?

II. Matthew 15:29-31 – Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing.

Here is a familiar picture!

- ✓ Matthew 4:23-25 – And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people... They brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them.
- ✓ Matthew 8:16-17 – That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”
- ✓ Matthew 14:34-36 – They... brought to him all who were sick and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

And now here in Matthew fifteen, we have the last of Matthew’s four healing summaries. And this time, more than any other time, we see Matthew alluding to the Old Testament promises of the Messiah and all the abundant blessings of His kingdom.

- ✓ Isaiah 35:1-6 – The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.

Now compare this with Matthew! “The crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing.” The Messiah is here, and He brings with Him the *blessings* of the *rule and reign of God*! So what do the crowds do? Matthew tells us: “And they glorified the God of Israel” (15:31b). *Who* glorified the God of Israel? I believe that Matthew uses this phrase, “the God of Israel”, to signify that *these* crowds are actually *Gentiles*! * Mark tells us that when Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, He “went through

* The phrase “Yahweh [of Hosts, the] God of Israel” appears 169 times in the Old Testament. Only 34 times does the phrase “God of Israel” appear without an immediate connection to the covenant name “Yahweh”. In many of these 34 instances, the covenant name “Yahweh” can still be found in the *immediate* context (Ex. 24:10; Num. 16:9; Josh. 22:16; Isa. 52:12). In the few remaining instances where “God of Israel” appears in isolation from “Lord”, it twice functions to *contrast* the God of *Israel* with the *Gentile* king of *Assyria* (1 Chron. 5:26; Ezra 6:22). In several of the other instances where “God of Israel” appears in isolation, it is actually spoken *by Gentiles* (1 Sam. 5:7-10; 6:3-5; Ezra 7:14-15). Though the phrase “God of Israel” is by no means always used in this way, it is ideally suited for use on the lips of Gentiles. In the New Testament, the full phrase “Yahweh God of Israel” appears only once. In Luke 1:67-68, “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, ‘Blessed be Yahweh God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.’” In keeping with the Old Testament, Zechariah specifically refers to the “God of Israel” by His covenant name “Yahweh” and celebrates the fact that He has “visited and redeemed” *Israel*, “His people”. But here in Matthew 15, Matthew says only that the crowds glorified “the God of Israel”. Apart from Luke 1:68, there is no other place in the Gospels (or the entire New Testament) where this phrase appears! Everywhere else, it is said only that people “glorified God” or that they “gave glory to God” (Matthew 9:8; Mark 2:12; Luke 2:20; 5:25-26; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43). But here, we are told that the crowds glorified the God *of Israel*. It seems almost certain to me that Matthew used this phrase here to signify that the crowds were Gentiles (cf. France, Carson; contra Hagner). It is also of significance that in the story of the feeding of the 4000 Matthew uses a different Greek word for “baskets” (15:37) than the one he uses in the feeding of the 5000 (14:20; cf. 16:9-10). These different Greek words would especially make sense in the light of Gentile and Jewish audiences respectively.

Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis” (7:31). The Decapolis was a territory marked by the federation of ten cities on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. (The fact that Jesus later crossed the Sea of Galilee to the region of Magadan [39] also assumes a location on the east side of the Sea of Galilee.) And just like Tyre and Sidon, the Decapolis was *Gentile* territory (cf. Mark 5:1-20). So the *Gentile* crowds glorified the God of *Israel* “when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing”! The *Gentile* crowds glorified the God of *Israel* as they were experiencing for themselves the *blessings* of the Messiah’s kingdom! But then look at what we see in verses 32-39:

III. Matthew 15:32-39 – Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.” And the disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?” And Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

Does this sound familiar? It was only in chapter fourteen that we read about the feeding of the 5000. And now in chapter fifteen we have the feeding of the 4000! Not only is the topic the same (the multiplication of bread and fish to feed the crowds), but the two stories are told in almost identical ways and with many of the exact same words.[†] Why is this? Why do we need to hear about two of the *same* kind of miracles told in the exact *same* way with many of the exact *same* details in the space of only *two* chapters? It’s for the same reason that we have two very similar healing summaries in the space of only two chapters. Matthew is careful to tell us about these two different miracles in almost *identical* ways so that we will be sure to compare them with *each other* (and this is surely the very thing that Jesus intended)! In the first miracle, Jesus feeds the *Jews*, representing to them all the kingdom blessings of *today*, and *foreshadowing* the great

[†] There are many people who have concluded from this that there must have been only one feeding, and that somehow from this one story, we ended up with two different versions! How else can we explain the fact that the same basic story is told in the same basic way in two different places? And how else can we explain the disciples’ unbelief for the *second* time? Surely, if this was actually a second feeding (*after* the feeding of the 5000), the disciples would not have been so utterly clueless as to how Jesus could possibly feed so many people in such a desolate place! Surely they could have at least guessed the possible solution instead of acting like they had no idea whatsoever (see continuation above)! But if the feeding of the 4000 and the feeding of the 5000 are really just two different versions of the same story, this still doesn’t explain *why* Matthew has included them *both* in his Gospel. So one commentator sees the clue in the number of baskets that were left over. The twelve baskets in the feeding of the 5000 point to the twelve tribes of Israel. But the seven baskets in the feeding of the 4000 point to the fullness of the Gentiles (Hagner; cf. France). It’s *possible* that there may be some truth to this. In Matthew sixteen, Jesus *seems* to draw special attention to the exact *number* of the left over baskets: “Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, *and how many baskets you gathered?* Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, *and how many baskets you gathered?*” (Mat. 16:9-10) But whether the numbers have any significance or not, we certainly don’t need to assume that there was only one miracle of feeding! (See continuation above)

feast and Messianic banquet that is still to come. In the first miracle, Jesus fed the Jews... *in the second miracle, Jesus feeds the Gentiles*. Maybe this helps to explain why the disciples seemed so clueless as to how Jesus could possibly feed so many people in such a desolate place when they had only *recently* witnessed the feeding of the 5000! Can Jesus really mean to say that Gentiles can also have a place at the Messiah's table? Can Jesus really mean to say that the "dogs" can share in the children's bread? Well, what should we make of these things *in the light of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman*? On the one hand, we have a Canaanite woman with great *faith*. On the other hand, we have Jewish teachers full of hostile *unbelief*. The Canaanite woman may have been a Gentile, but by her great faith in the Jewish Messiah she has proved to be more like a *true Jew* than many of those within the nation of Israel! *This* is what Jesus wanted His disciples to see – so that they might rightly understand His healing ministry in the Decapolis and the feeding of the 4000. No, it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. But what if, *by their faith*, the "dogs" prove to be more like children than the "children" themselves? What then? Jesus answers this question by healing the Canaanite woman's daughter, by performing His miracles of healing in the Decapolis, and then by His feeding of the 4000.

Conclusion

The dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles is not yet abolished (just like in verses 1-20 the distinction between clean and unclean foods is not yet done away with), but Jesus is preparing His disciples for what is soon to come. Remember what Jesus once said in response to the faith of a Gentile Centurion:

- ✓ Matthew 8:10-11 – Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

And then compare this with the report of Paul and Barnabas to the church in Antioch:

- ✓ Acts 14:27 – When they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, *and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles*.

And so even today, the Gentiles are coming from east and west to join Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all believing Jews at the Messiah's table – no longer as Gentiles, but rather as true Jews (Rev. 2:9, 3:9; Rom. 2:17, 21, 25-29)... *true sons and daughters of Abraham* (Gal. 3:23-29; Rom. 4:13-17; Eph. 2:11-22)! The door of faith has been opened to the Gentiles... so that by faith we also may experience all the blessings of the Messiah's rule and reign, not only today, but also in the age to come. The Canaanite woman is no longer one of the dogs. *By faith*, she has become one of the *children* – part of the commonwealth of Israel, and heir to all the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Eph. 2:11-22). *This* is the great miracle of the Gospel.

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*.

Let us not forget that we are who we are, and we are what we are, only because of faith – and nothing else. Not because of birthright and not because of anything we have done. Faith is the difference between the Christian and the world. Faith has always been and always will be the only thing that pleases God. In so far as there is anything else in us that pleases God, it is because it flows from faith. The essence of who we are is that we are a people of *faith* – a people who simply *believe* not only that God exists, but who *believe* that God graciously *rewards* those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6) – just like that Canaanite woman. True faith always bears fruit, but we can never move beyond the simplicity of faith – of simply believing the promises of God.

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 1:20 – For all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

Faith is simply saying “amen” to the promises of God. And so at the end of the day, it is only and always the increase of faith that really matters. What matters is a *stronger* “amen” to the glory of God – an “*amen*” that is filled always with *more conviction* than it was before.

Romans 4:20-21 (cf. 2 Thess. 1:3) – No distrust made [Abraham] waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus Himself is “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (12:2). And Paul sums everything up:

- ✓ Romans 1:17 – For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

We are who we are, and we are what we are, *only* because of *faith* – because God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles – that we, too, might share in all the blessings of the kingdom alongside of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob.

- ✓ Romans 3:27 – Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.