

Sheep and Dogs

Matthew 15:21-39

I have never really appreciated the biblical symbol of dogs, because it consistently represents the worst of people. It was an insult of the highest order to refer to someone as a dog, or to call a group of people “dogs.” Ultimately, according to the book of Revelation, the “dogs” define those who are outside the kingdom of heaven.

Rev. 22:14 “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. 15 But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie.”

For Paul, the “dogs” were the Judaizers, those evildoers among the Jewish people who were confusing and deceiving new Gentile believers, teaching them and insisting that they must first be circumcised before they can become a Christian. And as wrong as it was to continue the Old Testament sign of the covenant, those whom Paul was denouncing were the worst possible example of hypocrites.

Phil. 3:2 Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!”

For Jesus, the “dogs” were the people who were killing him, to use the words of Psalm 22, which he quoted upon the cross,

Ps. 22:14 “I am poured out like water, And all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; It has melted within Me. 15 My strength is dried up like a potsherd, And My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death. 16 For dogs have surrounded Me; The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; 17 I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. 18 They divide

My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots.”

So Jesus prays,

Ps. 22:20 “Deliver Me from the sword, My precious life from the power of the dog. 21 Save Me from the lion’s mouth And from the horns of the wild oxen!”

I emphasize all of that this afternoon because the background is necessary for you to fully understand this woman whom Jesus encounters in Matthew 15. His great Galilean ministry has been completed, and Jesus withdraws to definitively Gentile territory. He is leaving the land of Israel, such that no longer will the “outsiders” come to him, but rather he himself now goes out to them.

v.21

Those cities both lie in the modern day nation of Lebanon, north of Israel. And according to Mark’s gospel, Jesus initially sought some temporary seclusion.

Mark 7:24 “From there He arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden.”

He could not be hidden.

v.22

There is much to note about this woman, and I want to begin by stressing her faith. We don’t know how she came to know or believe in Jesus, but what she demonstrates to us in the words Matthew has recorded is,

I. AN AMAZING FAITH.

It is amazing for several reasons. She is a woman, first of all, coming to a man, coming to a home where a man was staying. She is not put off by the cultural prohibitions that would required

her silence and an unquestioning endurance of the pain of her daughter's spiritual oppression. Despite that obstacle, she believed! And she cried out to Jesus, but not with the self-absorbed selfishness of someone whom we would describe today as having an entitlement mentality. She recognized Jesus and addressed him correctly. With honor. She called him Lord. Master. She acknowledged his power, and perhaps, even likely, she recognized and received his spiritual authority.

She also called him Son of David, such an accurate and appropriate title for the Jewish messiah! But how did she know? Where did she get this understanding? Who taught her? We don't know; we are not told. We just hear her as she speaks. We just recognize and honor her faith.

Let me emphasize this, that the Lord's promise to David was one of the most prominent promises of God in the whole of the Old Testament. The promised son of David was the greatest hope that any true Old Covenant believer would have, and this woman seems to understand that promise very personally. The promise is of a great and mighty king, a ruler, a redeemer.

2 Sam. 7:10 "Moreover I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; nor shall the sons of wickedness oppress them anymore, as previously, 11 since the time that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel, and have caused you to rest from all your enemies. Also the LORD tells you that He will make you a house. 12 "When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever...16 And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever."

That promise is reemphasized in,

Ps. 89:35 "Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David: 36 His seed shall endure forever, And his throne as the sun before Me."

This woman has an amazing faith, for she cries out to Jesus with a recognition of his glorious identity as the offspring of David. She, "a woman of Canaan," whom Mark identifies further as "...a Greek, a Syrophoenician by birth."

You see, this woman had no right to address Jesus, outwardly. She had no right to even be in his presence, because everything about her was unclean. Everything about her, according to the regulations of the Old Covenant, rendered her ceremonial unclean, unfit to enter the presence of God. But none of that deterred her, because Jesus had done away with those external, ceremonial distinctions of clean and unclean. He he was now doing away with those distinctions between the Jew and the Gentile. So this woman's amazing faith was,

A. The faith of a woman considered unclean.

And that didn't matter to her! That didn't restrain her from coming to Jesus. She believed. And she exhibits as well,

B. The faith to seek mercy.

That's her prayer, "Have mercy on me." Mercy is all about our misery, the misery of our lives. Mercy is all about God's reaction and response to our need and misery. And it takes faith to plead for mercy. It takes faith to admit your misery, and in the midst of that misery, to cry out for help. That is the faith to which we are all called, isn't it? With this great encouragement,

Heb. 4:14 "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who

cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Beloved, this unclean, Canaanite, Gentile woman demonstrates to us the very essence of faith, giving us an example upon which none of us could improve. This prayer is so appropriate, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.”

Her specific need for mercy had to do with the spiritual well-being of her daughter, whom she describes as being “severely demon-possessed.” And she knows, she understands, that above all else, Jesus’ power is spiritual. Jesus’ greatest work of healing is in the realm of the spiritual world. So this woman is not seeking mercy for any physical need, although that is an appropriate thing to do. But even more significant, even more important, is the desire to be delivered from the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms, forces of evil that were severe in the harm they were causing her own daughter.

Now, having said all of that about her faith, there is even one more thing to be said about her amazing faith, and that is,

C. The humility of faith.

First, notice Jesus response to her, for it seems rather inappropriate. He ignores her! And his disciples’ are even worse.
v.23

Jesus has a point to make, and it relates to what I just described regarding her uncleanness as a Gentile. Jesus is using this situation to demonstrate that those ceremonial barriers between types of people are being removed, but in making that point he seems initially to be unsympathetic toward this particular

woman.

v.24

I mentioned “dogs” at the outset, but the first animals identified in our text are sheep. Now, sheep are dumb animals. They are pack animals, following the crowd no matter how foolish that might be. They are stubborn, naive regarding danger, easily led astray and not very agile when it comes to escaping from the threat of harm. But sheep is what the Bible uses to represent God’s people, old and new testaments. For example,

Ps. 100:3 “Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.”

There are less flattering references, though, as well.

Is. 53:6 “All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

Jer. 50:6 “My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray; They have turned them away on the mountains. They have gone from mountain to hill; They have forgotten their resting place.”

But God shows particular affection toward his people with this identification of them as sheep.

Ezek. 34:11 ‘For thus says the Lord GOD: “Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. 12 As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. 13 And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited

places of the country. 14 I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down,” says the Lord GOD. 16 “I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment.”

And Jesus would use that same image.

John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep... 14 I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. 15 As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. 16 And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd....27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. 28 And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand.”

So that’s the point, a point that is made in the context of this Canaanite woman’s amazing humility. She doesn’t respond with offense at Jesus’ words, but rather with a greater and deeper faith. She understands, she believes. And with all appropriate humility, she responds with humble persistence, seeking mercy in her time of need.

v.25

Jesus responds further,

v.26

Now, at this point, if cultural considerations were all that mattered, Jesus has just insulted her in the most obvious and offensive of ways. He called her a dog. It was an unmistakable putdown, according to the culture. Culturally, it should have ended the conversation. On a human level, there was no possible response that could have deflected the rejection which Jesus seemed to give her. The conversation was over. Jesus wouldn’t help her because she was a dog, a Canaanite, and not a beloved sheep from the nation of Israel.

But, again, she understood the gospel. She understood the universal appeal of the gospel. And so rather than take offense at Jesus, she continued to express her faith, with a humility that few of us will ever achieve in this life.

v.27

She accepted the identification as a dog, because it didn’t ‘matter! The blessed food of the gospel would spill over to all the nations, even to her as a Canaanite woman. To continue the illustration or analogy, she would be blessed by the crumbs that fell from the master’s table.

So it is, in the theological language of Paul, that the gospel...

Rom. 1:16 “...is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

Even more fully, we read about the word of the gospel,

Rom. 10:8 “But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him

will not be put to shame.” 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

So Paul would write to the Galatians,

Gal. 3:25 “But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. 26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

This woman believed that, and so she received mercy from Jesus! It was,

II. An amazing mercy.

For Jesus rewarded her faith. He ignored her ethnic identity. It no longer matter that she was a Canaanite, or a woman. It no longer mattered that she would have been considered unclean by Old Covenant regulations, or that she would still be considered unclean by the self-righteous Jews of Jesus’ own day. Jesus would give to her the...

A. Mercy to reward faith.

He responds to her faith; not that she earned his favor, but that he freely grants his mercy as a reward which honors her faith. Her faith was the means, the instrument, by which she received Jesus’ blessing, even as it is for us to this day.

And so this woman is praised, this woman is honored by the lips of Jesus himself. And his point is, therefore, so clearly established. “O woman, great is your faith!” Thus, his mercy.

v.28b “Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.”

So there is,

B. Mercy to heal the needy.

And Matthew makes a point to emphasize that outpouring of mercy with additional descriptions of Jesus’ healings.

v.29-31

In fact, what follows is not merely a repetition of the feeding of the five thousand which we studied in Matthew 14, but a very similar miracle which, in this context, demonstrates Jesus’ mercy,

C. Mercy to show compassion on all.

That’s the emphasis, the widespread, unrestricted mercy to those in need.

v.32-36

It seems almost superfluous, doesn’t it? Matthew could have left this miracle out, and nothing really would change. But with this miracle, we observe the excess of Jesus’ mercy. The extravagant, prodigal display of his mercy. When Jesus saw the crowd, the crowd of people in this Canaanite district, he says so plainly, “And I do not want to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.”

So Jesus’ sheep are not only from the nation of Israel, but from all the nations of the world. Again, as he himself declared in,

John 10:16 “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

Jesus shows mercy upon this woman, because he has

brought her into the fold. Though she was a Canaanite, she is now one of Jesus' sheep. Such an amazing mercy. And,

III. SUCH AN AMAZING GOD.

That's really the focus here. That God would be glorified, as he was.

v.31b "...And they glorified the God of Israel."

So we can step back just a moment, and as you observe this miracle, the point to be made is that,

A. God's power is worthy of our praise.

The four thousand men were all fed, as well as the women and children.

v.37-39

They all ate and were satisfied. It was a real miracle, with a real demonstration of supernatural power, which was the subject of their praise.

And we should respond in the same way tonight that the people of Tyre and Sidon responded. Above anything else, in the midst of all the details of this story, the point to be made is that,

B. God's glory is worthy of our praise.

"They glorified the God of Israel." We are called to do the same! And so this afternoon we join the chorus of heaven, and we sing praise to the great glory of God.

Rev. 4:11 "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created."

As we worship together today, join with this Canaanite woman in that very song!

Rev. 7:10. "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb...12. "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, Be to our God forever and ever. Amen."