

### Focus Text

“And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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.” But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.”

**(Matthew 15:21–28, ESV)**



Jesus departs from the fields of Galilee and begins to head north to the district of Tyre and Sidon. This is the modern-day equivalent of an Ohio State fan walking into Ann Arbor, Michigan. Jesus is going to Gentile territory, leaving the comfort of His Jewish settlements. We're not told why, except that Matthew uses the word "withdraw," which suggests that Jesus wants to remove Himself from the arguments His fame is now causing. So Jesus heads to the coastal district, and while there, we are treated to another odd yet powerful story.

Jesus meets a Canaanite woman. Interestingly enough, that phrase was outdated during the life of Jesus. Matthew is using this term to indicate beyond a shadow of a doubt that this woman isn't Jewish and doesn't worship YHWH. Yet she approaches Jesus with a level of respect that He hasn't received in His own community.

So Jesus decided to give the woman a rabbinic test to see how she would respond. It comes in three sections. Test one is the silence. Jesus doesn't respond. However, she is convinced beyond a doubt that Jesus is a man of God and can heal her daughter. So she continues to beg Jesus and the disciples to heal her daughter of this demonic spirit. Jesus then offers her a second test. Allegiance, Jesus reminds her that He's Jewish and has come on behalf of YHWH to free the children of Israel. She, in a kneeling position, doesn't question His station or allegiance; instead, she acknowledges that Jesus has enough power to heal even the other nations. She has passed His test! She acknowledges Jesus supreme rule and reign. She understands that Jesus sits at the head of the Master's table, but that the Master has enough bread not only for the children of Israel but for all the nations of the world. This is the foreshadowing of the scope of God's Kingdom. It's not just Israel, but the Lord is offering healing to all the nations under the power of Jesus.

In a final display of pleasure, Jesus rejoices because she has seen clearly who He is and what He is capable of. Jesus makes it clear that because she has placed her trust in Him, her daughter will be freed from the demonic, and, in true fashion, there is no waiting; it happens at the instant Jesus commands it. Two observations in this story. First, Jesus is indeed the bread of life, and in the miraculous, immediate exorcism of the demon from this pagan woman's daughter, we see that Jesus is Lord over all creation and intends to spread the Kingdom of God throughout the earth. Secondly, we see this woman's faith in Jesus and the realization that Jesus is Lord. We aren't told of a conversation story where she becomes a Jew, but it's safe to say that this moment has shown her that all the other idols she worshipped cannot hold a candle to the Lord Jesus Christ, and it wouldn't be a very big stretch to say she may have begun following Jesus as many others had done.

## Application

### - The Test

*“Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.” Then he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” (Luke 9:18–20, ESV)*

There’s only one correct answer. The Canaanite Woman and Peter got it right. How about you? Do you recognize Jesus as the Savior (Christ?) He isn’t just some nice guy, but the one who holds the whole world in His hands. Knowing who Jesus is gives us hope and confidence!

Who do you say He is?

## Notes

“Tyre and Sidon were Phoenician coastal cities located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Lebanese mountains.<sup>[1]</sup> Understanding their significance transforms how we read the Canaanite woman’s encounter with Jesus.

These weren’t merely distant foreign cities—they carried deep theological weight in Jewish memory. Tyre and Sidon were notorious in the Old Testament as centers of Baal worship, and Jezebel, Ahab’s infamous queen, came from Tyre.<sup>[2]</sup> The prophets often denounced these cities, with Ezekiel characterizing Tyre’s king as the personification of pride.<sup>[1]</sup> For Matthew’s Jewish audience, these names evoked centuries of idolatry and spiritual corruption.

Yet the geography carries another layer of meaning. While some readers might recall Jezebel when hearing “Tyre and Sidon,” others would remember the widow who supported Elijah.<sup>[3]</sup> This dual association prepares readers for the narrative’s tension: a woman from the most unlikely place demonstrates extraordinary faith.

Both cities were great maritime powers and centers of trade,<sup>[1]</sup> making them economically and culturally significant. The area was north and west of Galilee in the southwestern part of modern Lebanon.<sup>[2]</sup> By traveling there, Jesus deliberately entered Gentile territory—a boundary-crossing move that foreshadows his willingness to minister beyond Israel.

The historical detail matters too. The word “Canaanite” was out of date in Jesus’ time but drew attention to the Old Testament use of the word to describe the idolatrous inhabitants of Canaan that the Israelites were commanded to expel.<sup>[2]</sup> Matthew’s choice to call her a “Canaanite” rather than using the more contemporary term “Syrophoenician” emphasizes her status as an outsider—yet this ancient enemy becomes a model of faith. The narrative reinforces the message of 11:21–24, where Tyre and Sidon were more open to repentance than Chorazin and Bethsaida.<sup>[3]</sup> The very cities associated with Israel’s spiritual enemies become examples of receptiveness to Jesus’s message.”<sup>1</sup>

“Jesus’s words here aren’t an insult but a deliberate test—and understanding the context transforms how we read them entirely.

The Greek word for “dogs” (*kunariois*) is a diminutive form referring to house dogs or domestic pets, not the wild, street-roaming animals that Jews used as a derogatory term for Gentiles.<sup>[1][2]</sup> This distinction matters enormously. While wild dogs in that era were filthy and dangerous creatures that Jews commonly used when insulting Gentiles, Jesus deliberately referenced house dogs—alluding to Jewish election in a far less derogatory manner.<sup>[3]</sup>

Jesus was likely testing this woman, as many rabbis tested their disciples.<sup>[1]</sup> He may have used this metaphor to explain his mission to Israel and the kingdom of God, similar to how he used comparable imagery in the Sermon on the Mount to indicate that the gospel’s holy message must not be defiled by those unreceptive to his invitation.<sup>[1]</sup> His response expanded on his assertion that he was sent only to Israel, using an analogy of a parent feeding children at a table with dogs standing nearby—indicating Israel’s privilege, though this privileged status had already been critiqued as insufficient elsewhere in Matthew.<sup>[4]</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [1] Stephen R. Miller, *Nahum-Malachi*, ed. Max Anders, Holman Old Testament Commentary (B&H Publishing Group, 2004), 257.

[2] Roger L. Hahn, *Matthew: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 196.

[3] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 415.

The woman’s response reveals what Jesus was testing for. Rather than challenging him, she humbly pressed forward, saying “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table,” demonstrating that she already understood God’s program went to Israel first but that Gentiles could still receive blessing through them.<sup>[1]</sup> Everything about her request demonstrates she grasped the essential theological point: Jesus is Lord of all because he is the promised Son of David, and it is his obedience to his role as Israel’s messiah that renders him the savior of all nations.<sup>[5]</sup> Matthew emphasizes that the faith Jesus most highly commended was expressed by Gentiles, and this woman’s faith even compared favorably to that of the twelve disciples.<sup>[2]</sup><sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> [1] Joshua Little, “A New Family: Jesus and the Coming of the Kingdom of God Reorient the Role of Women in God’s Mission,” *Priscilla Papers* (2020), 34:1:17.

[2] Charles L. Quarles, “Matthew,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1527.

[3] Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 1:231.

[4] Douglas Mangum, ed., *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*, Lexham Context Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020). [See [here](#).]

[5] Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 177.