

Found: When Ordinary People Meet Jesus – Jesus and the Outsider

Matthew 15:21-28

By [David Strain](#)

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Well let me say as we begin how very glad we are to have you here with us, especially if you've come along at the invitation of a friend. As you may well know, we are looking on these Sunday evenings at six episodes from the Biblical accounts of Jesus' life in which He meets with ordinary people who are really not so very unlike you and me and He addresses some of the issues they were facing, many of us are still facing today. In just a moment we are going to read the story we'll be considering together tonight, so let me invite you to go ahead now and take a copy of the Bible from the pockets in the pew in front of you and turn with me in them to page 821. Page 821. We're going to be reading Matthew chapter 15 beginning in verse 21. You'll find that on the bottom left-hand side of the page, page 821. Before we read it together, it is our custom to pray briefly and ask for God's help as we seek to understand His Word. So would you bow your heads with me? Let's pray.

Father, we thank You that You speak to us in the Scriptures. We pray that tonight you will help us to understand the truth about Jesus and as You do, would You please show us just how much we need Him? And even more than that, we ask You to give all of us faith, just like the poor woman in the story before us, that the same Jesus she met might also meet with us and have mercy on us and change us forever. In His name we pray, amen.

Well let's read God's Word from Matthew chapter 15 beginning in verse 21:

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! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly."

Amen, and we thank God that He has spoken to us in His holy Word.

From an Outsider to an Insider

Ang Lee is the Oscar winning movie director. He made movies like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *The Life of Pi*. Ang Lee, in an extraordinary moment of vulnerability in an interview once said of himself, "I am a drifter and an outsider. There's not one single environment to which I can totally belong to." Did you hear that? It's quite a statement; isn't it? "There's not one single environment that I can totally belong to." He feels like someone who doesn't know where he belongs. He's a misfit. He lives with alienation, with exclusion. "There's not one environment to which I can totally belong."

I wonder if you can relate to that. Truth be told, being an outsider it a reality that many of us have experienced of. Perhaps that especially the case when it comes to the church; we really feel like we just don't belong.

Well our passage tonight is an account of what happens when Jesus meets an outsider like that. Would you look with me at verse 21 one more time please? Notice how Matthew speaks about the woman who meets Jesus. He says she is a Canaanite who has come out to Jesus from the region of Tyre and Sidon. In Jesus' culture it was unacceptable for a rabbi, a religious teacher, to talk to a woman at all and certainly not to a Canaanite woman. They were the ancestral enemies of the Jewish people. So she is the epitome of an outsider. And look how Jesus deals with her. She's begging him for help and at first, verse 23, He does not respond at all; not a word. And then when the disciples press Jesus, verse 24, He reminds them that He did not come to minister to any but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. She's a Canaanite; she's not really part of His mission. I think I know how I would have responded at this point were I in this woman's shoes overhearing words like these from the man I was pleading for help from. I'd have turned on my heels and I would have walked away. But this remarkable woman does not do that, does she? You really do have to admire her determination. She is not to be put off, and instead she throws herself at Jesus' feet. First she meets with silence, then she overhears rejection, and now to cap it all it looks like Jesus comes right out with direct insult. Verse 26 - "It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Did He just call her a dog? Hardly the most seeker-sensitive of approaches. In fact, isn't it our fear of just this kind of judgmentalism and hostility that we worry about meeting with when we come to church? It's the kind of thing that keeps some of us away from church, isn't it? We're afraid that our outsider status will be met with cold indifference or even with outright disdain, and so we stay away.

Well is that really what's going on here? It is a perplexing passage to be sure. If we take a closer look I do hope that we'll begin to see that actually Jesus isn't trying to push this Canaanite woman away at all. In fact, He's trying to draw her out. He's working to make obvious to the disciples who are with Him what He already knows to be true about her. Jesus is not here engaged in a spate of unthinking misogyny. He is teaching and He's not really teaching the Canaanite woman so much as He's teaching His disciples. He's teaching the church about who the insiders and who the outsiders really are. So let's take another look at the text, shall we?

I. Faith's Fact

The first thing I want you to see is the remarkable fact of this woman's faith. It comes out especially clearly I think if you notice her perseverance. The verb in verse 22 translated in our version, "she was crying out," involves the idea of something she began and continued to do. She kept on crying out. She will not stop. And when at first Jesus didn't respond she's not put off. And even when she overhears His reply to the disciples describing His mission as targeting only the Jewish people, instead of accepting defeat she steps up her campaign, doesn't she? Verse 25, "She came and knelt before him saying, 'Lord, help me.'" And when Jesus finally does answer her with that difficult word about not throwing the children's bread to the dogs, her ingenuity and her good humor deflects the apparent insult and still finds a way to press hard for the solution she seeks. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Well while we may be left scratching our heads over Jesus' words, we're left in no doubt at all about where this woman stands. With every obstacle thrown in her path, each one more difficult than the last, her faith in Jesus as the only person out there who can possibly help her, shines brighter and brighter and brighter. The harder the response the clearer her faith, until in the climactic moment of this encounter in verse 28 Jesus exclaims in a word of affirmation and praise unmatched and unparalleled anywhere else in Scripture, "O woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire" - which of course has been Jesus' goal all along. Her great faith has overcome every hindrance, surmounted every obstacle, and taken hold of Jesus Christ. His difficult way of dealing with her has made it impossible now to hide the glowing genuineness of her trust in Him. Whatever else we might say about this difficult exchange we have to join Jesus in admiring her crystal clear confidence in Christ alone, don't we? The fact of her faith. It is indisputable and clear.

II. Faith's Focus

And then would you notice secondly the focus of her faith. It's not that she just

really believes that her daughter will get well. She does not have an abstract and undefined faith that everything will somehow be okay. No, her faith has an object; it has a focus. Look at the way she addresses Jesus in verse 22. "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David." She calls Him "Lord," a title full of significance, speaking both to Christ's deity and to her own submission and trust in Him. And when that's combined with "Son of David," it really does express her conviction. Jesus is God's Messiah, the promised heir of Israel's greatest King, the one who came to save God's people from their sins. She knows Jesus can deliver her demonized daughter and shower her with mercy. So when Jesus demurs in verse 24 she comes and kneels before Him and repeats her request, "Lord, have mercy," the verb, "to kneel there," means to bow in devotion and in treaty. It's even used sometimes to bow in worship. While the woman herself may not fully understand the significance of everything that she says and does here, Matthew's language, as he reports it to us, is designed to signal to us the reader what is really happening. She is confessing Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah, as her own Lord. She is submitting to Him. Even when He challenges her as an outsider, she claims a place in the Master's household, however lowly that place may be. Jesus, and only Jesus she knows, has the mercy she needs. So she has extraordinary faith and her faith has a focus. She puts all her faith in Jesus Christ alone.

III. Faith's Fruit

Now let's bring all of that together. Notice in the third place faith's fruit. Faith's fact, its focus, now its fruit. Here's what happens when outsiders believe in Jesus like this. Here's why faith in Christ is what really counts and why all your faith must rest in Christ alone.

Mercy

And the first thing to see, the first thing an outsider gets when she places her faith in Jesus is mercy. That's what she was after, wasn't it? "Have mercy on me, Lord." And that is what we all need. Not advice, not guidance. We don't need Oprah; we need a Savior. We need mercy. In this case her daughter has been severely oppressed by a demon, verse 22. In the Bible, demonic activity appears in a few other places in the Scriptures but it is particularly clustered around the appearing and the work of Jesus Christ. When He came into the world evil began to react. His arrival sets the kingdom of God and evil on a collision course. And so if you scan through the Gospel stories you'll see again and again Jesus is confronted with the demonic and the satanic and the wicked and again and again Jesus triumphs, driving out evil, establishing His rule. And the Canaanite woman seems to know clearly that's why He came. "He came to destroy the works of darkness and He can set my daughter free." She puts all her confidence in Christ, she begins to cry to Him for mercy, and her unstoppable faith elicits from Jesus precisely the grace she needs. Verse 28, "Her daughter was healed

instantly.”

The German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann is not ordinarily a safe guide to interpreting the Bible but when it comes to Jesus' work in driving out demons he does have this one remarkable insight. “When Jesus expels demons and heals the sick,” says Moltmann, “He is driving out of creation the powers of destruction and is healing and restoring created being who are hurt and sick. The lordship of God, to which the healings witness, restores sick creation to health.” And then listen to this. “Jesus' healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world; they are the only truly natural things in a world that is unnatural, demonized, and wounded.” That's what's happening here. That's what happens when we trust in Jesus. He overthrows evil in our lives. The amazing power of the way things were always supposed to be breaks in upon the disordered world that now is. The only truly natural things, transforming mercy, saving grace, but right a world that is unnatural and demonized and wounded. For most of us it will not be anything so dramatic as the demonization of this Canaanite family, but it will still nevertheless be the liberation of our lives from the grip of disordering, disorienting, disturbing evil; it will be freedom from hell's fury and deliverance from sin's pollution and power. That is the gift that Jesus' mercy gives when we trust Him and put our faith in Him. Isn't that mercy that you need? He alone can give it to you and He invites you to trust Him this evening. So the first thing you get when you put your faith in Jesus is mercy - mercy to overthrow your heart's darkness with light to cleanse your sin-seared conscience and set you free from the bondage of evil - mercy.

A New Status

And then the second thing you get when you put your faith in Jesus is a new status, a new status. You move from being an outsider to a true insider. And that really is the big lesson of this passage. Let's zoom out for a moment and look a little at the context. Glance over at the previous page in your Bibles to the very first verse of chapter 15. You'll see there, Jesus is being verbally assailed, assaulted by the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious experts of the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem. They are attacking Him for breaking with tradition. He is now on the receiving end of judgmentalism and hostility at the hands of the insider elites. And then in verses 10 to 20 we see Jesus taking His disciples aside and He uses the opportunity of His interactions with the Pharisees to teach the disciples how to think clearly about who the real insiders and who the real outsiders are from God's point of view. We're using the language of outside and inside. The Jewish categories were clean and unclean, defiled and undefiled. In Jewish thought, objects and actions and especially people could be unclean and they could make you unclean.

But look down at verses 18 to 20. Jesus' point to His disciples is what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this defiles a person, “for out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false

witness, slander. These are what defile a person but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.” Here’s Jesus at His most revolutionary. You see what He’s doing. He’s taking these traditional categories of clean and unclean, defiled and undefiled, insider and outsider, and He is subverting them and transforming them radically. Being defiled or being clean in the sight of God has nothing to do in any ultimate sense with ritual washing; it has to do, He says, with your heart attitude. Being an insider or an outsider has to do with the condition of your heart. And it’s after having said that, that He moves from holy Jerusalem in verses 1 to 20 to pagan Tyre and Sidon in verses 21 and following, from engaging with Pharisees and disciples who do not get it to dealing with a Canaanite woman who does get it. He moves into enemy territory - out of the Promised Land onto Gentile turf. And so it really is a beautiful irony therefore that it’s the Canaanite woman, not the disciples, not the religious scholars in Jerusalem, who understands that Jesus is Lord, the Son of David, “You’re the Messiah,” she says with crystal clarity.

For Whom did Jesus come?

Not unsurprisingly Jesus’ disciples want to send her away; they dismiss her. And look again at Jesus’ response. “I was sent only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” verse 24. It’s an odd reply, don’t you think, given what happens next? It seems like Jesus is agreeing with them. They want rid of her and Jesus seems to be saying, “Well you know you’re right. She doesn’t qualify for My help. I was sent only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” So you would expect Him, if that was what He were saying, to immediately do what the disciples are asking and dismiss her. Only He doesn’t send her away. In fact, she comes much closer and falls at His feet. There is something else going on here; something wonderful. Remember Jesus is challenging the categories of who’s in and who’s out, what’s clean and what’s defiled. I think He’s saying something like this, “I came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, I came for the insiders in God’s covenant community, and you’re right, she’s a Canaanite, so should she receive My mercy? Does she belong? Is it possible that a Canaanites woman may in fact turn out to be in the end a lost sheep in Israel’s house after all?”

And so then He turns to her in verse 26 and gives voice to the very attitudes that He has left behind in Jerusalem. “It’s not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” That was how the Pharisees thought, how the disciples thought, wasn’t it? Grace was just for them, just for insiders, just for those who outwardly conform. Everyone else? They don’t deserve the same treatment. They’re dogs; that’s what they are. But some scholars suggest that Jesus said all of this with a smile, with a tone of voice that indicates the irony of the situation. You know you can cause great offense with an email when you were only joking, right? I won’t conduct a straw poll to see how many of you regret hitting send. Tone of voice and body language is missing, so it’s missing here. We can’t see how it is that Jesus speaks with her. Is it possible that He somehow conveys to her that He is really articulating the wrong thinking of others, challenging her?

She certainly seems to get it. She's not put off; she steps up and responds with winning humor, "Yes, Lord and even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters' table. If I'm a dog, I still belong in the masters' house and even dogs get to eat the crumbs. I'm not an outsider at all; I belong in the house. And Jesus, You're the Master. Won't You give me the mercy that I need?" He did come for the lost sheep of the house of Israel but by her response this Canaanite woman demonstrates what the disciples miss and the Pharisees deny. She has discovered, hasn't she, she has discovered we come to belong to God's people not on the basis of our ethnicity or our religious rituals but based entirely on the response of your heart to the person of Jesus Christ. This outsider Canaanite woman is actually an insider after all. In a real sense, she is a lost sheep for whom Jesus came.

In Christ: From an Outsider to an Insider

Some of you know what it's like to be an outsider, an exile, a misfit. You feel what it's like not to be long but the message of this passage is faith in Jesus changes all of that in some very important ways. It takes us from the margins and moves us into the very heart of God's kingdom. It adopts us into His family. It wins for us acceptance with God and membership in His church. When you put all your hope in Jesus alone, evil's power and pollution is overthrown in your heart and you are translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of God's love. You move from being an outsider to a true insider, from an exile to a citizen, from a stranger to a member of the household. You come to belong. Don't you want to belong? When you trust in Christ He makes you a member of the family.

Maybe you've met with your share of judgmentalism and hostility from the religious elites, even from disciples over the years. It could be you've met with silence and rejection and insult rather like the Canaanite woman in our story. But I wonder if you've begun to see tonight that what matters most is not what other people think about you so much as what you think about Jesus Christ. That's what determines whether you belong. It's Him you need most of all. His mercy and the welcome into His family only He can give. Well perhaps as you've listened you've found you can relate to this woman's experience. Maybe you'd like to think more deeply about how Jesus deals with our sin-sick hearts and brings us home into His household. As David said earlier as he was introducing our service, one way that you can let us know that you'd like to talk further is to fill out and tear off the simple response form in the bulletin. You can put it in the baskets at the exits on your way out and we'll be very glad to follow up with you that way. Alternatively, I'll be down here at the front; if you'd like to come and speak I'd be delighted to talk over some of the things we were discussing together this evening.

"Closing with Christ"

But please understand the really pressing issue isn't whether you connect with

us; it's whether you will connect with Jesus. This woman shows us the way. Overcoming every obstacle her faith gets hold of Christ. Will you trust in Him? He has mercy for you. He's the one you need and when you trust Him His mercy will be yours and you will come to belong. Shall we pray together?

Our Father, we praise You for Jesus, who came to seek and save the lost like this Canaanite woman and her daughter, perhaps like some of us tonight. We ask that You would take hold of our hearts also, that we may, as we trust in Christ, receive His mercy and truly come to belong. In Jesus' name, amen.

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