

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 15:21-28
“The Importance of Faith”

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Matthew 15:21-28

Verse 21

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

- For some time Jesus and his disciples had been in the region of Galilee. At this point he moves on from that area.
- Tyre and Sidon are Gentile, as opposed to Israeli, cities. They were located in what is now Lebanon about 30 miles from Galilee outside of Israel.
- Jesus probably went to this place to escape the large crowds in Galilee and the constant attacks from the Pharisees.

Verse 22

A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.”

- The Canaanite nation is an Old Testament reality. It did not exist in the time of Jesus. Therefore, the reference is not to the woman’s nationality but to her cultural background. What the Bible wants us to understand is that she was not a Jewess.
- Her manner of addressing Jesus is, first of all, respectful. The word “Lord” in Greek usage in Jesus’ day is equivalent to the use of the word “sir” today. She greets Jesus with great and proper respect. However the title, “Son of David” is a Messianic title. This implies one of two things: (1) This woman knew what some Jews were saying about Jesus and used this title because they did or (2) she suspected that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and so greeted him with a Messianic title. Either way, she suspected that there was something special about Jesus.

- She asks Jesus for “mercy.” This implies that she understood that she could not approach Jesus on the basis of rights or merit. There was no reason for him to listen to her, given who she was and from whence she came. She asks him to pay attention to her on the basis of mercy alone.
- The problem is her daughter who suffered from some form of demon possession. No description is given of the symptoms from which the girl suffers. We do not know the daughter’s age, name, etc. Because we are given so little detail about the girl, we know that she is only incidentally involved in the story. The story is not about the healing. It is about the woman.

Verse 23

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

- Though the woman begged for mercy from Jesus, Jesus made no response to her.
- However, she persistently continued to call out to him, begging mercy.
- The disciples asked Jesus to send the woman away because her crying out was a disturbance to their peace. To them, she was not important because she was a woman, not Jewish, and making a public nuisance of herself.

Verse 24

He (Jesus) answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

Jesus’ answer may have been directed to the disciples, in which case it would confirm their feelings about this troublesome woman. However, it is more likely addressed to the woman in explanation of his position in not responding to her cry for mercy. In either case it would have confirmed what the Jews and the disciples believed, that the Messiah was sent to Israel and not to the rest of the world.

Verse 25

The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

- Though Jesus’ response may have been regarded as a rebuff, this woman will not be stopped. She is desperate to get help for her daughter. Once attention is focused upon her, even negative attention,

she seizes the opportunity to respectfully push her case. She begs Jesus to help her.

Verse 26

He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

- Jesus reiterates his position and that of his fellow Jews. The Messiah was sent to Israel, the “children.” His language is slightly offensive since he compares those outside of Israel to dogs. However the offense is lessened since the term used means pet dogs.
- The point of Jesus’ response is that it is not right to take the food meant for the children of the household and to feed it to their pets. The children’s food should be served to the children.

Verse 27

“Yes Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

- She acknowledges that what Jesus said is true, and that she should not be treated as a child. All she asks for is the crumbs that fall unnoticed from the table to the floor. She does not need the children’s food, just the crumbs which they are not even aware they have lost.

Verse 28

Then Jesus said, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

- Faith is the Greek word that means trust. Jesus tells the woman that her insistent trust in him is not misplaced because her request will be granted. She will be allowed the crumbs that fall from the master’s table. Those crumbs are sufficient! Her daughter was healed.

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