

Prayers

Opening prayer

Within everything else I do today, Lord Jesus, give me the courage to carve out the time and space I need to honour You and listen to your voice. Calm me down, give me peace, free my spirit, clear my mind, and let me take a spiritual breath of fresh air from every moment spent with You. Hour by hour, Lord Jesus, change me for the better by the power of Your Holy Spirit: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Get hold of a song or hymn book and sing some songs in praise to God, by yourself, or with others. Let the words of the songs fill your heart. Alternatively, listen to some CD's or tracks.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the future of your country.** Pray for the leaders of your country, yours presidents and prime ministers, monarchs and all high officials. Pray that they will know th onerous burden of duty they each carry.
- Pray for those parts of the world experiencing drought, especially Sudan
- Give thanks to God for the joy of love and friendship, and give special thanks for those who are closest to you

Meditation

Be careful, fellow believers ...

With the best of intentions, we lose our way
For the world is full of sins and temptation.

Be wise, fellow believers ...

There is always more to learn about faith
So allow God's Spirit to teach His wisdom.

Be diligent, fellow believers ...

Do not be casual in reading God's Word
For Satan delights in ignorance of the truth.

Be positive, fellow believers ...

Our God has a plan for the world's salvation,
And he will achieve it against all the odds!

Be content, fellow believers ...

For everything is possible through Christ our Saviour,
Our victory has been won, and our future secured!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 15: 21-28

²¹ Jesus got out of there and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

²² Then, a Canaanite woman who came out of that region cried out,

‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter suffers terribly with a demon.’

²³ But he did not say a word to her.

So His disciples came and urged him,

‘Get rid of her, for she is shouting out behind us.’

²⁴ He answered,

‘I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’

²⁵ She then came and began to worship Him, saying,

‘Lord, help me.’

²⁶ He answered,

‘It is not right to take the children’s food and offer it to the household dogs.’

²⁷ She said,

‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from their masters’ table.’

²⁸ Then Jesus answered her,

‘Woman, you have great faith! Let your request be granted.’

And her daughter was healed at that moment.

Review

This story is well known as the story of the faith of the Canaanite woman. But there is much more to it, because at heart, it is the story of the healing of child in what we will find to be strange circumstances. Everything about the story is remarkable. The Canaanite woman’s daughter suffers because of a demon, but we do not know any more about what this might mean. Moreover, the woman herself is not a Jew, and this is why Jesus does not make her His primary concern. It is rather hard for us to understand why Jesus might be so dismissive, but the story has at least inspired some. It suggests that even when our own requests to God are perhaps untimely or inappropriate, then He will still respond out of His compassion.

The most disconcerting thing about the whole story, however, is the manner in which her request for help for her daughter (15:22) was rejected first by the disciples and then by Jesus. At first, the disciples seemed annoyed that the woman was shouting behind Jesus as He travelled, and they urged Him to get rid of her so that she would not cause them any further nuisance (15:23). Jesus then turned away the woman and her request by saying that He was only sent to ‘*the lost sheep of the house of Israel*’ (15:24). We imagine that Jesus might have taken this hard line simply to draw out the woman’s faith later on, but there is no denying the fact that what Jesus said was in general, the truth about His earthly ministry. Most of His work was focussed primarily on Jews, but not exclusively. Matthew has reported at least one incident so far in which Jesus helped non- Jews, which is the healing of the Gentile centurion’s son (8:5f.). Because of this, we are entitled to think that Jesus was not as unsympathetic as his rebuke here sounds.

After her rejection the woman begged Jesus for help and worshipped Him, but He rebuffed her cry again by saying to her, ‘*it isn’t right to take the children’s food and offer it to the household dogs*’ (15:26). This sounds highly dismissive towards someone in need, and not like Jesus at all, but Jesus had more than the woman to worry about. At this point in the Gospel, Jesus’ ministry in Galilee had been successful but had come up against fierce opposition from the Pharisees (9:34, 12:24f.). It seems that He now decided to focus His attention on the disciples, and explain to them the things of God’s Kingdom (Matt 13f.). Moreover, He was about to challenge the disciples to say who they thought He was; it would be a crucial test of His ministry (16:16f.). So in these challenging times, Jesus was not interested in the same healing and deliverance ministry as before (Matt 8,9). He wanted His disciples to see Him as the Jewish Messiah, and the request from the Canaanite woman was a distraction from this.

Nevertheless, Jesus responded to the situation, and in so doing, illustrated an important truth, which is that some of the most important lessons of life are learned unexpectedly! The Canaanite woman persisted despite Jesus’ harsh words (16:26), and her reply to Jesus was quick and perceptive, and it is now quoted as one of the most famous examples of faith found in the Bible. She replies to Jesus, ‘*Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from their master’s table!*’ (15:27). It was a stunning reply, and those present would have wondered what Jesus would say and do next.

We do not have to wait long, for Jesus responded immediately; He always responds to faith. Without any word addressing a demon or any other mention of healing, Jesus simply grants the woman's request, and acknowledges her faith (15:28), and her daughter is healed! How we would love to know more about what actually happened! Nevertheless, the great tension that has built up throughout the story is now released, and its focus is now back on Jesus and on the Kingdom quality of faith.

Jesus was pursuing His own course of action yet He was able to see beyond His own plans and respond to the individual plea, and this is what appeals to us within the story. The incident is rather like the story of the persistent widow who demanded justice (Luke 18:1f.); the Canaanite woman would not stop without presenting her petition, and she was blessed! Many suggestions have been made about what Jesus and the woman may have said later, and whether there was any hidden meaning within what Jesus said about scraps thrown to the dogs (15:26). However, it is best to read the passage simply and accept that Jesus was indeed highly focussed on His ministry to the *'lost sheep of the house of Israel'*; He was also right to test the woman and bring out her faith, so that we might be encouraged to persist, as she did.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Who was the Canaanite woman and what was she doing?
- Why did Jesus stand back from the woman and her need?
- Jesus' test of faith and the response of the woman
- What does this story teach us about faith?

Notes on the translation of the passage

V21 'Jesus got out of there ...'

The translation here is more forceful than you will find in other Bibles, which say 'Jesus went away from there'. However, the general story line indicates that Jesus wanted to get away from Galilee, and the Greek verb can have the meaning to 'escape', so I have attempted to convey this sense of urgency in the translation.

V22 'A Canaanite woman who came out of that region'

It is not clear exactly what region is being described here. However, the same Greek words are used in this sentence as for Jesus' departure from Galilee in verse 21, and for this reason, it is possible that Matthew suggests that this woman was following Jesus from Galilee. In this case, 'that region' refers to where Jesus came from, not where He was going.

V22 'suffers terribly with a demon'

The Greek word 'diamonizomai' means to be possessed by a demon, not so much as completely dominated so as to be uncontrollable, but simply bound in some way due to the effects of the demon. We may assume here that it was some kind of sickness, which is not stated in the story. The notion of 'suffering with a demon' is one that should evoke pity in us not revulsion.

V23 'set her free'

Most Bible versions have 'send her away', but it is also possible to translate 'set her free', because the Greek word is a general one that can mean all kinds of 'freeing', and is sometimes even used to describe forgiveness. In the context of the story and the request for deliverance, I prefer this translation.

V25 'began to worship Him'

There is a disagreement in some of the ancient manuscripts about whether this should be 'she worshipped Him', or 'she began to worship Him'. You could say that it does not make much difference to the story, but the imperfect form of the verb ('she began to worship Him') gives a sense of the urgency and drama of the occasion, typical of the whole story, so I prefer to accept the latter.

V26 'offer it to the household dogs'

There were a number of Greek words for dogs, and the word used here indicates household dogs kept not so much as pets as scavengers that would eat up scraps just as in this story.

V27 'even the dogs eat the scraps ...'

The Greek word here can mean crumbs of bread or scraps of meat. With dogs, it is far more likely that we are talking about meat scraps thrown to the dogs rather than bread crumbs!

V28 'let your request be granted'

There are a number of ways of translating this, and the Greek says 'Let it be for you as you wish'. This is a straightforward way of granting a request, so I have translated it exactly in this way.

It is interesting for us to compare this story with the same one in Mark (7:24f.). There, Jesus had gone into a house and asked specifically to be left undisturbed. The woman's plea was even more of an intrusion into Jesus privacy and need to focus on His work and ministry, yet the outcome is the same! This reinforces the simple picture we have of the story, that it is a simple case of the evidence of faith meaning more to Jesus than anything else in the world.

Who was the Canaanite woman and what was she doing?

Strangely, the woman in this story is called a 'Canaanite' by Matthew, and this was the term used largely in the Old Testament to refer to non-Jewish occupants of the land of Israel, certainly, a 'Gentile'. Mark, in his version of the story (Mark 7:24-30) says she was of 'Syro-Phoenecian' origin and this was the same region to the north of Galilee where Tyre and Sidon lay. Now we need to work out where the woman was heading, and at first, you might think that she was coming down from Tyre and Sidon to meet Jesus. However, if you look at the notes above on verses 21 and 22, these indicate to us that she may have been returning to Sidon and Tyre (her home region), having followed Jesus, possibly having witnessed recent events. Clearly, though, she was burdened by the young daughter she had, and was seeking an opportunity to get near to Jesus, a man she had seen heal others.

The woman called out to Jesus as soon as she had access to Him and spoke of her daughter who suffered 'with a demon', which could have manifested itself in any number of ways. Her request to Jesus was similar to that of the centurion from Capernaum (8:5-13); both were Gentile, both needed the healing of someone close to them, the disease was understood as demonic, and Jesus initially expressed hesitation, but was then won over by the extraordinary faith of a Gentile. These two healing stories should be considered a 'pair', one about a high ranking man, and the other a lowly woman. Also, just as the Centurion in the earlier story, the Canaanite woman addressed Jesus as 'Lord', but also included the title 'Son of David'. This title was a Hebrew title used of Jesus as the Messiah, and sounds strange from the lips of a Canaanite woman, that is, unless she was a proselyte (a convert to Judaism) or had been following Jesus recently with the crowds, having heard His parables (ch13) and perhaps even been miraculously fed (14:13-21).

Why did Jesus stand back from the woman and her need?

What happened next is extraordinary. Jesus remained silent as the woman called out (15:23), but the disciples intervened asking Him to do what she wanted (see translation notes for verse 23 which explain why this translation is different from other Bible versions). Jesus then told everyone that His mission, just like the mission on which He had sent the disciples earlier in His ministry, was 'to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (15:24, see 10:6). It is interesting that Jesus described the people of Israel as 'lost' for the second times, coming so soon after His denunciation of Israel's religious leaders. The matter may well have been heavy on his heart after seeing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees from Jerusalem, and knowing that these people represented spiritual authority in Israel. So why did Jesus appear to stand back from the woman in her hour of need?

It seems that Jesus wanted to draw out of her both worship and faith. In contrast to the Pharisees' response to Him, the woman's worship was extraordinary, but part of a pattern within Matthew's Gospel. It seems that those who were outcast or impure were the first to worship Jesus; the outcast leper (8:2), the centurion (9:18), and now the Canaanite woman (15:25). What Jesus was looking for was this acknowledgement from His own people, from the 'lost sheep' of God's people, but up to this point in the story the only Israelites who had done this had been the disciples (14:33). The one difference between the disciples and the others who worshipped Jesus, was that the others all brought requests to Jesus believing that He was able to do something for them, whereas the disciples only worshipped Him after a demonstration of His power. Here, the woman worshipped Him because of her great need, and her faith that He was able to evict the demon that held her daughter.

Jesus' test of faith and the response of the woman

Jesus' comment was a supreme test of faith for the woman. It was common for Jews to call Canaanites 'dogs', and with this understanding, it is clear that Jesus was saying to her, 'why should I give you something that I have come to give to the people of Israel?' The woman's answer was a masterpiece of intuition and penetrating argument (15:27), which won over Jesus and gained His approval, sufficient for Him to finally grant her request. It was the kind of brilliant riposte that we usually think of Jesus as delivering to those who came and asked Him difficult questions (12:1-8, 17:24-27), but the situation was totally reversed. A Gentile woman demonstrated great intelligence as well as great faith, which caught Jesus' attention (v28); but was this just the woman's brilliance or was it the work of the Holy Spirit through her?

Jesus certainly drew out the woman's faith before delivering her daughter from the demon that held her in suffering. Such a healing is wonderful in itself, and there is nothing wrong with this interpretation, yet there is so much more in this story. Was it really true, for example, that Jesus saw Himself as having nothing to do with gentiles in general yet was willing to reward faith wherever He found it? Why did Jesus speak to the woman in the way He did?

What does this story teach us about faith?

Everything we have said is enhanced significantly if we recall the 'context' of the story. Firstly, Jesus was seeking to be alone with the disciples, and this is why He was reluctant to involve Himself; but His purpose for being with the disciples was to teach them, and as events unfolded, He used the Canaanite woman's approach as a means of teaching them about faith. Indeed, the faith shown by the woman here is described as 'great faith' (15:28). He recognised signs of faith in her from the way she addressed Him, and then by means of the discussion He had with her, drew out from her the great faith which resulted in His word of healing (15:28). Peter and the leaders of the Church would soon have to recognise faith within Gentile converts (see Acts 10,11); Peter had just demonstrated 'little faith' (14:31) to Jesus when walking on the water and he would have to learn to recognise 'great faith' in Gentiles if the Church was to grow. It was an important lesson.

Further, Jesus had not gone against His own self imposed rules for mission. Having said He would teach the disciples alone and privately, He earlier said He would only teach others in parables (13:43), because of their unbelief. Here, Jesus' apparently cutting words to the Canaanite woman were in fact a parable. It is we who misread the parable if we see it simply as a means of Jesus keeping the woman at bay; it was an invitation to the woman to be led to its meaning by the Spirit of God, and this is what happened. She saw it not as a rebuff, but as a riddle which had something in it for her from God. This parable gave her hope for her little girl, and this is what her amazing reply of faith confirmed. Jesus responded immediately.

It is possible that if the woman had been following Jesus for some time, seeking His blessing and healing, then she would have been present at the feeding of the five thousand (14:13-21), which Matthew includes in the frenetic round of activities which made up this part of Jesus' ministry (ch 13-17). If this was the case, 'scraps' from the table of Jesus were surely enough for her; had not 12 basketfuls been gathered from the miracle of life performed on that day?

Lastly, the whole episode points to the eventual extent of Jesus ministry for all people. It was generally true that within Jesus' life He ministered to His own people, as He clearly indicated in verse 24. However, at the close of the Gospel it becomes quite clear that Matthew, a Jew himself, knew full well that Jesus' purpose was for the Good News of the Gospel to be broadcast to all, Jew and Gentile (28:19) alike. This story points to the faith which the Church would one day seek from Gentiles as a response to the Gospel of Jesus.

Discipleship

Application

It is inspirational to see how the Canaanite woman was able to receive hope by the Spirit of God out of an awkward conversation between Jesus and the disciples and a somewhat cutting comment at the meal table! Nevertheless, this is how the Holy Spirit works in a person of faith to encourage, to heal and to deliver. Therefore, when we go to church on Sundays, we can either become caught up in the awkwardness and difficulties of things, or we can be transformed by the Spirit to see God within even the most difficult of circumstances! People will criticise the sermon and the readings, and everything else that goes on in worship (for there is no Sunday service anywhere that appeals to all who have come to it), but when the Holy Spirit begins to work amongst people these things are of no consequence, and people are set free to worship without worrying about the difficulties! Our faith should be bigger than the circumstances in which we exercise it!

The story of the Canaanite woman teaches us that the one who seeks the Lord by faith and with worship (v25, 28) will receive His help and commendation. We should not forget that behind this story lay a young girl who suffered an unknown condition, whose mother believed her to suffer because of a demon. It was not so much her persistence that brought about the child's deliverance and healing, but the faith of a mother who was open to the Spirit of God and who trusted in her Lord. The story therefore encourages us to believe that anything is possible with the Lord, and we can even come to Him with our requests for others in confidence that He will hear and act. We may not see the full consequences of our prayers, but Jesus will act on them, just as He did for this woman; what we need is the faith to believe that He does and He will. The evidence of our eyes is not what should guide us, but the evidence of our hearts, by faith.

Questions for groups

1. Does it matter that the little girl 'suffered from a demon'? What can we learn about Jesus' deliverance ministry from this story?
2. Summarise what you think the disciples could have learned from this event.
3. Why does Jesus call the faith of this woman 'great faith' (15:28)? Is there any measure of faith we can usefully use today?

Discipleship challenges

- *Are there any parts of the country or the world where you will not go at God's command? Jesus has bidden us be ready to go anywhere for Him, yet many of us put up barriers in the way of God's call by saying 'not this' or 'not that'. We need to stand back from such conditions to allow God to move in power in our lives*
- *Discuss with your fellowship group the manner in which people respond to the idea that a child might be possessed by a 'demon'. How can we best understand this today?*

Final Prayer

We praise You, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. You have defeated all the powers of darkness and established the Kingdom of God, where love, truth, goodness and righteousness are found! You have done all this for us even though we are not worthy of Your love, and we thank You, Lord Jesus: AMEN
