

## NO WAY TO TREAT A LADY?

Matthew 15:21–28

The story we're looking at today raises a number of questions. It tells us about an encounter between Jesus and a woman, a Gentile woman, a woman with a heart-rending problem, a woman who came to Jesus in faith and asked for help.

The way Jesus treated her seems incredibly harsh and out of character. First of all he refused to speak. Then when he did speak he ignored her and addressed the disciples. Then he not only turned down her request but did so in what seems a most insulting manner. 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.' There's no getting round the fact that this analogy put her in the category of one of the dogs.

The distinguished scholar F W Beare describes this as an 'atrocious saying,' showing 'incredible insolence' and based on 'the worst kind of chauvinism'. He finds it so unacceptable that he refuses to believe that it is true. His conclusion is that this story is more about the struggles of the early church to come to terms with reaching Gentiles than it is about Jesus. In other words, the early church created a story and read it back into the life and ministry of Jesus. That's one way of coping with the difficulties.

But once we take that route it's a slippery slope to rejecting everything that doesn't fit in with our idea of what is acceptable today. In effect, we're doing the very thing that Beare accuses the early church of doing, crafting a Christ to suit our own ideas and sensibilities.

It is a hard saying but that's all the more reason to look at it very carefully and see what's going on, to trust God's infallible word rather than our own fallible wisdom.

Let's think for a moment or two about the occasion. Verse 21: 'Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.' Jesus had been ministering in Gennesaret, a place in Galilee to the northwest of the lake.

In Matthew chapter 14 Jesus' earlier attempts to withdraw to a solitary place had been unsuccessful. Large crowds followed him and found him and he healed those who were sick. At the end of the day the crowd were hungry. Miraculously Jesus fed them, well over 5000 of them, from just five loaves and two fish.

Jesus then sent the disciples on ahead by boat while he dismissed the crowd. In the night the disciples were struggling. It was a rough crossing. Just before dawn Jesus came to them, not sailing, not swimming, but walking – walking on the water.

When they came to shore they landed at Gennesaret. Chapter 14 ends like this. 'When the men of that place recognised Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to him and begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.'

When chapter 15 begins Jesus is still in Gennesaret and the first half of the chapter describes a controversy with the Pharisees and teachers of the law from Jerusalem. They complained that Jesus' disciples were not following the requirements of the ceremonial food laws. People with terrible diseases were being gloriously healed and all the Pharisees could think about was that the disciples were not washing their hands the right way. It was so exasperating. Jesus called them blind men trying to lead blind men.

That's the context for verse 21, 'Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.' These cities were on the Mediterranean coast about 30 and 50 miles respectively from Galilee. So it was a long journey. It was a journey out of Israel into Gentile territory, away from the crowds, away from the controversies.

Rather unexpectedly Jesus and the disciples were accosted by a woman. The NIV ignores a word in the original. That word is 'Behold'. Matthew is saying, 'Listen up. Here's something remarkable.' The woman is described in verse 22 as a Canaanite woman. This is the only place in the New Testament where this adjective is used. In his Gospel Mark describes her as 'a Greek,' that is, a non-Jew, 'born in Syrian Phoenicia'. The word Matthew uses is loaded. She was a Canaanite. He uses the old word for Israel's ancient enemies. When the children of Israel entered the promised land under Joshua it was occupied by the Canaanites and the Canaanites had to be destroyed. 'Listen up,' Matthew says. 'A Canaanite woman came to him.'

Matthew's description scarcely prepares us for what happens next. She was a woman, a woman from that Gentile region, a Canaanite woman. But she came to Jesus and cried out – and it means she kept crying out over and over again – 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is demon-possessed and she's in a bad way.'

In verse 23 attention shifts to Jesus and his disciples. 'Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps following us and keeps crying out."' I suspect that the disciples were unmoved by her problem. They were just thinking about themselves. Possibly they were thinking about Jesus and his need for some rest but at the front of their minds was this intrusion into their time out.

It's hard, isn't it, to cope with the troubles of the world: famine, earthquake, flood, war, poverty. In our heart of hearts we know it's wrong but compassion fatigue is a very real phenomenon. Sometimes we just want to switch it all off but it doesn't go away.

Finally, Jesus spoke, verse 24. 'He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."' Jesus reminded his disciples of the purpose of his ministry. It was to seek and to save the lost, people who were straying like sheep. He came as the Good Shepherd.

But Jesus was also reminding the disciples of the limitations of his ministry. It was the lost sheep of Israel he had been sent to save. God's greater purpose was to reach all nations through his chosen people but while Jesus was on earth his mission field was Israel, his priority was to restore Israel to their rightful role in the world. What Jesus said here was not vindictive or intentionally cruel. It was simply a statement of fact.

Let's turn our attention to the woman for a moment. She was obviously suffering and the reason for her suffering was her daughter. Like any normal mother she couldn't stand to see her own daughter go through such agony. The daughter was demon-possessed. We don't have a description of the symptoms here but we know enough from other places in the Gospels to know that it was a heart-breaking condition involving violence, self-harm and personality changes.

This woman was not an Israelite but she had obviously heard about Jesus and when he came to her neighbourhood she approached him in faith. The NIV alters the order a little, but the first thing she said was, 'Have mercy on me.' She recognised that she had no right to any help but she threw herself on the Lord's mercy.

As she spoke to Jesus she addressed him as 'Lord' and 'Son of David'. Notice that every time the woman spoke she addressed Jesus as Lord. Now this word could be simply the equivalent of 'sir' but I think in this context it has its deeper meaning.

She also called him 'Son of David'. That was a messianic title. She recognised him as the Jewish Messiah, the coming King, God's anointed. There were not many even in Israel who recognised Jesus as their Messiah but she had grasped who he was.

Jesus told her, in effect, you're right. I am the Jewish Messiah and that's all. The messianic blessings are for the Jews and you are not a Jew. 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.'

Her response to this is in verse 25. 'The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.' Translators are hesitant about reading too much into her actions but the word translated 'knelt' is the word for worship. She worshipped him and called him 'Lord'. She dropped the messianic title and simply threw herself on his mercy. 'Lord, help me!'

It's at this point that Jesus comes out with the almost unbelievable reply. 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' The children, of course, were the Jews. The dogs were the Gentiles. Jews were very dismissive of uncircumcised Gentiles and it was quite common for them to speak of Gentiles as dogs in this way. Dogs were unclean animals, scavengers, dangerous in packs and sometimes carriers of terrible disease.

I think we could have forgiven the woman if she had stormed off in disgust at this point. I've known women be hurt by far less cruel comments than this. But the Canaanite woman came back with an amazing reply. Most translations get it wrong and for obvious reasons. Here's the NIV. "'Yes, Lord,'" she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'" The word which nearly all translators get wrong is the word 'but'. That's not what she said.

'Yes ... but.' That makes it sound as if she's correcting Jesus, adding something he hadn't thought of. In the original the word is not 'but,' it's 'and'. She's agreeing with Jesus. She's saying, 'Yes, Lord, exactly, and even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from the tables of their lords.' The word 'lord' and 'master' are one and the same.

The woman was saying: I agree, Master. You are the Master. The children have a right to be fed by you at the table and I am just a dog. The dogs pick up the crumbs that fall from the Master's table.

The sequel and the conclusion is in verse 28. 'Then Jesus answered, "O woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.'

Jesus spoke with great emotion. The NIV has left out another word, just a single-letter word, 'O'. 'O woman, great is your faith!' Jesus was moved and what moved him was her great faith. This woman is the only person in the Gospels whose faith Jesus speaks about as 'great'. It was exceptional.

This strange and rather disturbing story has something to teach us about faith.

Faith is born out of a sense of need. Only the sick seek the help of a doctor. Sometimes the hardest trials to bear are those that affect our nearest and dearest and impact on us only indirectly. Faith begins with a sense of need.

Faith recognises that Jesus is the answer to that need. Jesus is Lord of all, the Master. We have no right to his blessings. We are sinners but he is gracious and merciful and we can throw ourselves upon his mercy.

Faith is tested in the furnace of suffering. Peter tells us that our faith is more precious than gold. Just as gold is refined in the furnace our faith is refined in trials of various kinds. That's what we see in this story. The frustrations, the rebuffs, the insults: they were all to test her faith.

It has been pointed out that the cold print of the text does not show whether Jesus spoke with a twinkle in his eye or a knowing glance. But even if he did he was testing her faith and when the need is so real that doesn't make it any easier.

Finally, faith was rewarded. Her request was granted. Her daughter was healed.