

SERMON NOTES
Matthew 15:21-28
“When Jesus Became ‘Woke’”

Intro:

- Was Jesus racist? Was he guilty of racial prejudice and ethnocentrism in his interaction with the Syrophenician woman?
- *Yes, say some commentators and some “woke” Christians today*

- When the Syrophenician woman asks Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter, he says, *“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”* The woman responds, *“Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table,”* at which point Jesus commends her faith and heals her daughter instantly. *Until now, the argument goes, Jesus has been racist, dismissing foreign people as “dogs.”* Supposedly, this encounter shows him the error of his ways. He became woke.

- *“Jesus uttered an ethnic slur. To dismiss a desperate woman with a seriously sick child...Jesus holds all the power in this exchange. The woman doesn’t approach with arrogance or a sense of entitlement associated with wealth or privilege. Rather she comes to him in the most human way possible, desperate and pleading for her daughter. And he responds by dehumanizing her with ethnic prejudice, if not bigotry. In our modern terms, we know that power plus prejudice equals racism...*
- *“Rather than being part of the solution to ethnic prejudice, Jesus seems to be very much part of the problem, according to this story. When confronted with the gentile pagan in this story, he explains that his message and ministry are for Israelites only, a comment of ethnic exclusion and prejudice that calls to mind a similar refrain from a more modern time – whites only – that reverberated throughout the South not too long ago.*
- *“This, I think, is the great lesson of the Syrophenician woman. It teaches us the dynamics of power and prejudice, of how even the best of humanity – the Incarnation himself – can get caught up in systems of oppression, in a culture of supremacy. Like many of us today, Jesus would have been reared into a prejudiced worldview.”*

- So... is this encounter the story of when racist Jesus became “woke” Jesus?

I. THE ENCOUNTER

Matthew 15:21 And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

- Went away from there – went away from where?

SHOW MAP SLIDE

- *Jesus had just been rejected at Nazareth – then he fed the 5000 (Jews) near Bethsaida just NE of the Sea of Galilee – and then went back to Gennesaret on the NW of the Sea of Galilee (near Capernaum)*
- And there in Gennesaret Jesus conducted a draining healing ministry and had yet another conflict with the religious leaders from Jerusalem
- *After this conflict Jesus then withdrew from Jewish territory and headed NW to the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon*
- Why did he go there?

Mark 7:24 And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden.

- He went to rest
- *He went to get away from the conflicts with the Jewish religious leaders and away from the demands of ministry in Galilee where crowds of people were coming to him for healing*
- But even outside of Israel Jesus could not hide because word had spread about a Jewish Messiah who was a Healer and Exorcist

Mark 3:7-8 Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him.

- *Among those from Tyre and Sideon who had heard of his healing and deliverance powers was a woman with a demonized daughter*

Matthew 15:22 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."

- What do we know of this woman?
- *She was a Gentile*
- More specifically, a Greek by culture (Mark 7) – likely spoke Greek and possibly believed in the Greek gods
- *More specifically, a Canaanite – a descendant of Ham and Canaan – and a member of a people group that was a historic enemy of Israel*
- And she lived in the region of Tyre and Sidon – which was inhabited by the Phoenicians and before them, the Philistines
- *At the time of Jesus, this region was part of the Roman province of Syria – hence a Syrophenician woman (Mark)*
- Modern day Lebanon

- *It is striking that this pagan Gentile addresses Jesus by the Messianic title of Son of David*
- *Have mercy on me, Lord Christ*
- And as a Canaanite woman, she is coming to the Jewish Messiah as the One who is able to deliver her daughter from evil spirits
- *How does Jesus respond?*
- He does not answer her a single word – he is silent

Matthew 15:23 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."

- *Undeterred, the woman persisted*
- She kept crying out for help – perhaps even day after day -- to the degree that the disciples became bothered by her pestering them
- *"Send her away" with her request granted – or not – just send her away*
- The disciples were about as tolerant and compassionate toward this Canaanite woman as they were when there were children around

- *Then Jesus spoke – to the disciples – not yet responding to the woman's request*

Matthew 15:24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

- But surely God so loved the whole world that He sent His only Son into the world to save the world?
- *What is this about being sent only to the Jews – the house of Israel?*
- What about the lost sheep of the Gentiles?
- *Surely all people are equal before God, are they not?*

- *Biblically speaking, prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus and Pentecost – the answer is: NO*
- All peoples of the world did NOT have equal access to a true knowledge of the one true God who revealed Himself to and through His Chosen People
- God's covenant was made with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—not with the Gentiles
- *From a biblical perspective, there are only two identity groups: the Chosen People of Israel – and everyone else*

- Prior to Christ's death and resurrection – this was the plight of the Gentiles:

Ephesians 2:12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

- *God's plan from the beginning was to reveal Himself and to bless the nations through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*
- The nation of Israel was called to be a light to the Gentile nations
- *For the most part, they failed*
- So this promise would ultimately be fulfilled through the Son of David, the Messiah – himself a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah

Isaiah 49:6 he says: "It is too light a thing that you (Messiah) should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

- We can question the wisdom of God's plan if we dare, but the reality is that God is God and we are not -- and God's plan has always been: *to the Jew first, and then to the Gentiles*
- Jesus was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel
- *It was his atoning death that would break down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles*
- It was only after his death and resurrection and ascension into heaven that Paul could write:

Ephesians 2:19 So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family.

Galatians 3:28-29 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

- *Through faith in Messiah Jesus and the atonement achieved by his death on the Cross, Gentile believers have been grafted into Israel's olive tree and included in the chosen People of God – spiritual descendants of Abraham by faith*
- Jesus died for Gentile sinners as well as for Jewish sinners to be sure – and salvation is offered equally to Gentiles as well as Jews -- but Jesus' earthly ministry was primarily among the Jewish people in Galilee and Judea -- *because Jesus was and is the Messiah promised to the Jewish people*
- This Canaanite Gentile woman heard Jesus say: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
- *She could have given up and walked away feeling rejected -- dejected – or angry -- but she didn't*

Matthew 15:25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

- *The word "knelt" can also be translated "worshiped"*
- And now instead of calling him by his Jewish title: "Son of David," she pleads with him, calling him, "Lord"

- *Jesus finally answers the woman:*

Mark 7:27 And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

- *Let the children be fed FIRST at least suggests the possibility of something for the DOGS*
- But did Jesus just insult this woman with an ethnic slur by calling her a “dog”???!?
- The word in Greek is the word for a small dog who is a family pet rather than the word for a wild street dog
- *Nevertheless, not exactly a flattering term of endearment*
- Of course, we don’t know the tone of voice or nonverbals as Jesus spoke these words
- *But even if we assume the words were a common Jewish saying spoken as kindly as possible – the words are undeniably problematic*
- If Twitter were available then – and if Jesus tweeted that statement about dogs – *he would have been cancelled and banned from Twitter*
- Even for those of us who love Jesus, these words jar us – maybe even disturb us
- *What’s going on here?*
- *The contrast between the children and the dogs is the contrast between those who are in covenant relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and those who are not*
- It has nothing to do with race or ethnicity as we understand it today
- *It has to do with the biblical distinction between Jews and Gentiles*
- The children at the table eating the bread are the Jews who are in covenant relationship with God – and the dogs under the table are the Gentiles who are not in covenant relationship with God but are in some sense loved and cared for by God as a household pet would be
- *It has nothing to do with skin color*
- It has nothing to do with dehumanizing a certain race or ethnic group
- *The contrast is NOT between those who have full human dignity and those who are looked down upon as sub-human*
- The contrast is between those who are part of God’s covenant people and those who are not

- This woman had called Jesus “Son of David”?
- *Did she understand the implications of Jesus being the Jewish Messiah sent to the Jewish people?*
- Did she understand that as a Gentile, she had no claim to the ministry of the Jewish Messiah?
- *Did she understand that the children seated at the Master’s table were the Jewish people, and that the status of the Gentiles was comparable to a family pet – in some sense under the Master’s care – but lacking the standing of the children of the family?*
- Is Jesus saying that Gentiles are forever excluded from the kingdom of heaven?
- *The coming of the Messiah and his kingdom is often pictured as a feast or banquet prepared for God’s chosen people*
- BUT not limited to Israelites – according to Jesus’ own teaching
- Rather, entering the kingdom of heaven would be by faith rather than by lineage of ethnicity
- *Do you remember what Jesus said after healing the Roman Centurion’s servant and marveling at the centurion’s great faith?*

Matthew 8:10-12 When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

- In other words, in the end, many of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be excluded from the kingdom for rejecting Christ – *and many Gentiles from all nations will be included in the kingdom because of their faith in Jesus the Messiah*
- In other words, some of the dogs under the table will enter the kingdom before some of the children seated at the table
- *Acceptance into the kingdom of heaven would be by faith in the Messiah – and not merely by belonging to a certain identity group*
- *It is interesting that this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman takes place between Jesus feeding the 5000 Jews (Matt. 14) and Jesus feeding the 4000 Gentiles (end of Matt. 15)*

- In fact, after his sojourn into the region of Tyre and Sidon – Jesus returns to the Sea of Galilee – but on the eastern shore – the Gentile side of the lake – and there he did many mighty works of healing
- And then having compassion on them – he miraculously provided food for 4000 men – besides women and children – most of them Gentiles
- The two miraculous bread stories illustrate God’s plans for a multiethnic kingdom.
- *The 5,000 at the first meal were Israelites; there were 12 basketfuls left over, one for each tribe.*
- By contrast, the feeding of the 4,000—occurring immediately after Jesus heals the Syrophenician woman’s daughter—takes place in the Decapolis, which is Gentile territory (Mark 7:31).
- *Even though Israel eats first, the Gentiles are fed too.*
- The “children” are provided for, but the “dogs” receive bread as well.
- This is exactly the truth that this Gentile woman discerned

Mark 7:24 But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

- She could have been offended and angered by the word “dogs”
- *She could have protested: That’s not fair!! I deserve a seat at the table just like the Jewish children*
- How dare you refer to us Gentiles as “dogs”!!
- *She could have just walked away in a huff*
- But she didn’t
- Instead she agreed with Jesus’ statement -- “Yes, Lord” – “I understand” and then she extended the saying in order to support her request –“yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”
- Brilliant
- She understood that he was a Jewish Messiah and she was not Jewish
- She understood that as a Canaanite she had no standing or claim upon his mercy
- She understood that he was not demeaning her humanity, but simply stating the reality that she was a Gentile and not in covenant relationship with God
- *She was not asking to be treated equally with the Jews as God’s Chosen People*

- She accepted her status comparable to a household pet rather than one of the children of the family
- “But even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”
- *She wasn’t asking to take bread away from the mouths of the children at the table*
- She would be grateful for any of the crumbs that the children dropped on the floor

SCOUT -- grandkids

- The Canaanite woman wasn’t demanding a seat at the table with the children
- She was humbly – and persistently – pleading for some crumbs that passed through the hands of the Jews who didn’t appreciate Jesus’ ministry
- *She wasn’t pleading on the basis of any merit or status or her own*
- She was appealing to Jesus’ goodness and compassion and mercy for all people – not just for the Jews
- And she believed that the Lord Jesus was so powerful and had such unique authority over demons – *that her daughter could be healed by a few crumbs from the Bread of Life*

Matthew 15:27-28 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.

Mark 7:30 And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

- Request granted – in response to her faith – a faith that was tested – and strengthened -- by Jesus, as he did not grant her request at her first cry for help
- *She came to know Jesus in a deeper way through this interaction than if he had simply granted her request immediately and sent her away*

II. WHAT THIS TEACHES ABOUT JESUS

1) Jesus was Jewish.

- Many Gentiles believe in Jesus as the Son of God and as a generic man
- *Fully God, Fully Man*
- But we need to add to that: Fully Jewish – fully Jewish in his humanity
- He was NOT a Generic Man – He was a Middle Eastern Jew
- *He didn't look like me*
- He wasn't Swedish – or a Swedish National

Emily – Swedish National

- He was NOT a white European
- *Neither was he black or African or Latino or Chinese or SE Asian or Arab*
- Nor was he a non-descript generic man that everyone can imagine that he looked just like “one of us” – whatever our identity group may be
- He was a Middle Eastern Jew – the Son of David – the Son of Abraham as well as the Son of God
- Oh, and by the way, it is said today that only people with power can be racist
- *Oppressed people – for example, minorities and people of color – by definition cannot be racist*
- Only white oppressors can be racist because the formula is: prejudice plus power equals racism
- *Guess what?*
- Jesus was a Galilean Jew – a member of an oppressed minority living under oppressive Roman rule
- *Neither Jesus nor this Canaanite woman had any political power – both were minorities living under the oppression of the Romans*

2) Jesus devoted most of his ministry to Jewish people in Jewish territory while also showing compassion to Gentiles

- Gentile believers tend to think of Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world
- *But he was also a Jewish Messiah – God's Anointed One promised to the Jewish people by the Jewish prophets in the Jewish Scriptures*

- And as the Jewish Messiah, his primary calling was to minister to the lost sheep of the house of Israel
- And yet interwoven throughout the Gospels are encounters of Jesus with Gentiles
- *His early ministry included healing people from Syria as well as the Gentile Decapolis region on the other side of the Sea of Galilee*
- The deliverance of the Gerasene demoniac also took place in this Gentile region
- *And of course Jesus healed the servant of the Roman centurion with a word of command in response to this Gentile's amazing faith*
- And right after Jesus cast out the demon from the Canaanite woman's daughter -- he went to another Gentile region for a healing ministry and then the feeding of the 4000
- *In obedience to the Father's will and direction, Jesus directed most of his ministry toward fellow Jews – but he did not turn away Gentiles who came to him in faith*

3) Jesus was without sin

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

- Accusing Jesus of racism – which is a sin – is a huge theological problem for any Christian – progressive or otherwise
- Our salvation depends on Jesus being the sinless lamb of God sacrificed for our sins – not for his own
- *If Jesus sinned – then we are all perishing in our sins*

4) Jesus was often provocative and sometimes offensive

- Some people today confuse holiness with “niceness”
- *Jesus was NOT always NICE as we would understand the term*
- Do you know that in the great love chapter – I Corinthians 13 – that defines biblical love – Agape love – *you will not find the word “nice”*
- Nowhere does it say: “Love is always nice”

- In the passage just before our text today in Matt. 15 – Jesus calls the Pharisees a bunch of hypocrites and blind guides for the blind
- *Later in Matthew 23, he calls the Pharisees “hypocrites” “blind guides” “blind fools” “whitewashed tombs” “serpents” “brood of vipers” and “murderers of prophets”*
- All true – but not very nice – indeed, downright offensive
- *And then, of course, overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple wasn’t very nice, either*
- And even with his own disciples – how many times did he call them out for having “little faith”?
- Even in his ministry of helping and healing people, he was often provocative in his interactions with them before granting their requests
- (“Do you believe that I am able to do this?” “Who touched me?” “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”)
- *And then of course, even with his grace-filled encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, he also confronts her with the truth of her multiple marriages and current immoral living situation*
- So it is not out of character for Jesus to speak to this Canaanite woman in such a way as to test the reality and strength and persistence of her faith before finally granting her request and healing her daughter
- He was NOT rejecting her or humiliating her –he was testing the sincerity and authenticity and tenacity of her faith in order to strengthen her faith
- *By the end of this encounter, this woman’s faith is much stronger than if Jesus had simply answered her initial cry for help and sent her on her way as his disciples suggested*

5) As Lord over all, Jesus has unique authority over demons and evil spirits

- We don’t know how long the daughter had been demonized – but the text says she was severely oppressed by a demon
- *We can assume the Canaanite woman had tried other remedies – and that none was successful*
- Jesus demonstrated his unique authority over demons and unclean spirits again and again in the Gospels – delivering both Jews and Gentiles from demonic oppression
- *Jesus – and only Jesus – is deserving of the title “Lord”*
- *He is Lord over disease and Lord over demons and Lord over death*

III. WHAT THIS TEACHES ABOUT FAITH

Matthew 15:28 Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

- Only twice did Jesus marvel at someone’s faith – and both times it was the faith of a Gentile – *this woman and the Roman centurion*
- *What was so great about this woman’s faith?*

1) Her persistence

- Her daughter needed healing – she came to Jesus for help – he didn’t answer her – she could have given up and walked away
- *She didn’t*
- She kept pestering the disciples to persuade Jesus to help her
- *They just wanted to get rid of her so they asked Jesus to send her away*

- Then she hears Jesus say: I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel
- She knew that did not include her
- *So she could have concluded that it would be pointless to keep asking for help because it must not be God’s will for Jesus to help a Gentile*
- But she didn’t give up
- *Instead of walking away dejected and in despair – or in anger – she approached Jesus and knelt before him as though worshiping him and again asked for help*
- And Jesus answered her: It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs
- Most people would have taken offense at that statement and walked away in anger
- *But she didn’t*
- *Why?*

2) Her humility

- *“Are you calling me a dog, Jesus?” How dare you!! I’m no dog! I have as much right to sit at the table and eat bread with the children as any Jew does! Who do you think you are to insult me like that?*
- *“I’m done” “I don’t have to put up with this name-calling!” “I’m out of here”*
- *That’s pride speaking*
- *And if she had responded with wounded pride and had left in a huff -- her daughter would have remained severely oppressed by a demon*
- *Instead, she responded with humility – and wisdom – and a quick wit*
- *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table”*
- *She accepted her status as a non-Jew and made no demands of this Jewish Messiah – instead, she humbly appealed to Jesus’ compassion and goodness to care for non-Jews as well as Jews*
- *Her humility enabled her to persist in asking for help – and in believing Jesus could help her daughter*

3) Her confidence in Jesus’ power and authority

- *Walking away offended – driven by wounded pride – would have been self-defeating – and harmful to her daughter*
- *Where else could she turn for help?*
- *Who else had the spiritual power and authority to cast the demon out of her daughter?*
- *She knew that Jesus was the real deal – and He was her daughter’s only Hope –*
- *Just a few crumbs of Jesus’ power and authority would be sufficient to heal her daughter*
- *That was the faith that impressed Jesus*

Applications:

1) Persisting in faith

- *How often do we cry out to God for help of some kind – hear no answer – maybe cry out again – receive no answer – and then give up – it must not be God’s will*
- *This text – along with several others – encourages persistent prayer and persistent faith*

- *That doesn't mean that as long as you persist in prayer you will always end up getting whatever you ask for*
- *But this story is a good example of something that is clearly taught in Scripture: keep on asking / keep on seeking / keep on knocking – until you receive what you ask for / until you find what you are seeking / until the door is opened to you*
- *Keep on praying // keep on believing // don't lose heart // and don't give up*

2) Humbly refuse to walk away offended

- *It's not right to throw the children's bread to the dogs*
- *How easy it would have been for this woman to take offense at that saying – and to walk away in a huff – not giving Jesus the benefit of the doubt as to what he meant – attributing bad motives to Jesus -- how easy for here to walk away offended – hurt – angry – and thereby leaving her daughter in a severely demonized condition*
- *Pride causes us to be easily offended*
- *How many people have walked away from a certain church / or from all churches / or from the Christian faith / or from God Himself – because they were offended by one thing or another*
- *Sometimes they leave one church and find another church where they fit and flourish better in their faith and walk with God*
- *That is the exception to the rule*
- *Most people who walk away from a church – or from the Christian faith – or from God – because they are offended by something – end up worse off spiritually – with their family and children worse off also*
- *Jesus' provocative saying to this woman caused her to go deeper in her faith – from a simple cry for help – to a deeper understanding of Jesus' identity and mission and power and authority and compassion*

3) Don't underestimate the power of Jesus – or the power of your faith

- *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to our Lord Jesus Christ*
- *Don't underestimate what his power and authority can do for you in your situation*

- And don't underestimate the difference your persistent, believing faith can make
- *"Great is your faith! Be it done for you as you will."*
- How many times in the Gospels does Jesus say something like: *Your faith has saved you / Your faith has made you well / Be it done for you according to your faith*
- How about you?
- *What are you believing God for right now?*
- Are you being persistent / humble / confident – in exercising your faith?

Prayer