

Mercy Beyond Borders (Mathew 15:21-28)

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“Domestication of God” is a common human tendency. It is the tendency to shrink God down to our size—confine Him within our tribe, our traditions, and our boundaries, and to assume He belongs only to us. It is the belief that He will hear only our prayers, bless only us, and that His mercy is limited to us. In Jesus's time, many Pharisees and rabbis had domesticated God. They believed God was only for Israel—and that He existed only within the tradition and boundaries they created. Some Jews strongly believed that the Gentiles were “unclean,” “without a portion in the world to come,” “like dogs,” and even “fuel for the fires of hell.” God is not interested in them and possibly doesn't love them because they do not have the covenant or promises of God. They can't have knowledge and faith in God.

In today's gospel lesson, a Canaanite woman comes and greets Jesus. Jesus's response is perhaps the most perplexing part of this narrative. Jesus appears to be callous and insensitive. Jesus seems to ignore her, rage-baiting her and trying to be territorial about God's blessings. Jesus withdrew to Tyre and Sidon, probably to get some rest. Did he respond coldly because he was tired and having a cranky day? Or is He agreeing with the popular Jewish notion that God belongs only to Israel? Or is Jesus unfolding something different and bigger here? The ending suggests that Jesus was neither cranky nor affirming the Jewish narrative that God is limited to them. Instead, Jesus surprises and unsettles everyone, revealing that He is the God of all, that His mercy crosses every boundary, and that faith can be found in unexpected places.

Jesus, the master teacher, was using a powerful engagement style similar to a “diatribe,” commonly used by Stoics and Cynics of the Greco-Roman period. This technique involves a teacher using an intentionally provocative, shocking, or severe statement to challenge a student. The teacher deliberately creates and progressively escalates tension. He forces the student to think critically, move beyond superficial answers, and formulate a sharp, reasoned counter-argument. The purpose is not to defeat the student in an argument but to help the student present the depth of their knowledge brilliantly in a dramatic and clear way. So it's a kind of revelatory dialogue. In today's gospel lesson, Jesus uses the “diatribe” like technique to reveal not only the Canaanite woman's faith, but also to teach his narrow-minded disciples and Jews that God cannot be confined; He is God for all, and His mercy crosses the boundaries.

Our gospel begins by telling us, “Jesus went away from there (the region of Galilee, a Jewish town) and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon” (which is predominantly a Gentile place). Here she comes to Jesus. We know who the Canaanites are; they were enemies of the Children of Israel. God cursed them and drove them out of the land of Canaan, giving the

land to the Children of Israel. It was not because of their ethnicity. It was because of their wickedness, idolatry, cruelty, temple prostitution, and child sacrifice. True knowledge and faith in God are hard to find here. This region is also known for Eshmun, the Canaanite (Phoenician) god of healing and medicine. But this Canaanite woman surprises us. Instead of going to Eshmun's famous temple just a few miles away, she comes to Jesus. Not only that, but her cry for help is theologically rich. She cries out, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." She clearly identifies and confesses who Jesus is—He is the Son of David. Her response suggests her faith—she understands the salvation story that Jesus is the promised Messiah and Saviour of the Jews. How is it possible that this woman has more insight into Jesus' identity than his disciples? This woman seems to understand what the members of the household of Israel have yet to grasp. This is impressive, but Jesus isn't impressed. He ignores her, and the message from his cold silence is clear... so what? What's interesting is that his cold silence isn't disengagement. Jesus didn't approve of the disciples' request to send her away. Jesus was using his silence to bring out and reveal what's inside each one around him. It makes the disciples reveal their true hearts. "Send her away; we want her to be gone." It also helps reveal something more of the Canaanite woman's faith—it was persistent, because she kept crying out. Jesus now takes the next step in the conversation. He broke the silence and escalated the tension. Jesus uses what is called a "Mirroring Technique." He mirrors the popular perception about Him to her. Jesus quoted the popular Jewish theology of the time. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." That means I am the saviour of the Jewish people, not of you. This response did not deter her. This led her to do something profound. She humbly came and knelt before him and prayed, "Lord, help me." Mathew uses this action throughout his gospel in two senses. It is an act of acknowledging Jesus' universal kingship and of worship. For example, at the beginning of the gospel, the Magi came and knelt before Jesus, signalling their worship and acknowledgment that he is the divine/God King. At the end of the Gospel (Mathew 28:27-28), when the resurrected Jesus appears before his disciples, they knelt before him when he said all authority in heaven and earth is his.

Here, Jesus gave the Canaanite woman a unique opportunity to reveal more of her faith before everyone. She seized that opportunity, and through her action she signalled that she acknowledges that you are not just the king of the Jews, but the king of the whole universe. For that, I worship you.

By this time, I suggest Jesus was already impressed by her faith. Jesus was saying, "I see that you understand that I am not only the Messiah of the Jews, but the Lord and Saviour of all who are capable of saving everyone."

Now here is the final opportunity to reveal the fullness of your faith, and he throws another saying at her: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. This quote

might seem derogatory to a modern reader. But a quick word study and context suggest otherwise. When Jesus says, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs,” the word He uses is not the harsh term for wild, scavenging street dogs. But the word “kynarion” means little dogs, household dogs, pet dogs that live inside the wealthy household as part of the household.

She likely came from a prosperous Phoenician background—Tyre and Sidon were wealthy coastal cities. This woman likely grew up around a rich table, children eating, and beloved dogs waiting underneath. So when Jesus uses this metaphor, it is not harsh—it is familiar. She understands it instantly. She steps into it with ease. It becomes an easy handle, a ready-made doorway, for her to express her faith to the next level. And boldly she did: "Yes, Lord—yet even the dogs eat the crumbs."

And when she responds with this brilliant, humble, faith-filled line, Jesus reveals the truth He wanted His disciples and all to see: “O woman, great is your faith!” and her daughter was healed completely. The word used for “great” in Greek means “mega.” Why her faith is mega. Even before his disciples and those close around him could see, the Canaanite woman confesses Jesus as the Messiah coming through the line of David, who is the Saviour and God of the whole universe- God of all. His mercy breaks every boundary, and everyone has a rightful place at God's table. Our Old Testament lesson rightly points towards this truth. “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather others yet to him besides those already gathered. (Isaiah 56:7-8)

In today's gospel lesson, we see Jesus deliberately step into Gentile territory. He deliberately engages a Gentile woman. He deliberately draws out her faith. He deliberately praises her faith publicly. Through this, He teaches us that God is not limited to an ethnicity or a group. He is the God of all. God's grace crosses every border, and God's compassion breaks every barrier. His love reaches every outsider. He creates faith in undesirable people and places. No distance is too far for him. We can come confidently in faith to Him, knowing that God's table is bigger than we think. God's mercy is wider than we imagine. God's love is deeper than our boundaries, and His mercy is sure for us! Amen.