

In the Gospel of Mark, the woman in our story is called a “Syrophenician.” Matthew, however, calls her a “Canaanite.” That’s easier to say than “Syrophenician” but there’s something more important going on with that change. The Canaanites are not just Gentiles but *enemies*. They are the people who were to be driven out of the promised land by the Israelites and who fought against God’s covenant people. There could be peace with other people of the Near East, but not with the nations of Canaan. In the Old Testament the people of Israel often got seduced into the worship of Baal and other gods of the Canaanites.

Jesus is a Jew who knows about those old conflicts between his ancestors and the people of Canaan. Now he has left his home territory of Galilee and gone north toward Gentile country, the region of Tyre and Sidon, where this Canaanite woman lives. Somehow she has heard of his reputation as a healer and comes to him to beg for help. She wants Jesus to heal her daughter. What will he do? Some of his people — and that apparently includes some of his disciples who are present— would say that he shouldn’t even speak to the woman. There are a couple of possible responses that Jesus might make. We might like to think that the obvious thing for him to say would be, “Of course I’ll be glad to help. God loves everybody.” We are the beneficiaries of centuries of the Christian church saying, “God shows no partiality” — it’s in the book of Acts. Well, we know that in theory. But if we remember that we get a little nervous when we have to drive at night through an area of the city populated by people of a different race, or that we felt uncomfortable when that Arabic looking person got on the plane right after us, we’ll realize that that nice enlightened attitude doesn’t come so easily. The other way to respond would be to say, “You belong to the wrong group. I can’t help you.” That’s the way Jesus does in fact answer. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” That may surprise and even disappoint us, but attitudes like that were part of the culture Jesus grew up in — just as, in different ways, they are part of our culture.

We can see the story of this encounter with a Canaanite woman as one of the things that made Jesus aware of the scope of his mission — that it wasn’t just limited to the Jewish people. But let’s concentrate for now on the way the woman deals with this rejection — because that’s going to tell us something about our own situation. She doesn’t get angry and insist that Jews are no better than Canaanites, or demand her rights. Instead she just repeats, “Lord, help me!” That doesn’t seem to do any good. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs, Jesus says. That is — “You and your daughter are dogs, not children of God.” Jews didn’t get enthusiastic about dogs — there’s nothing about them being “man’s best friend” in the Bible. Jesus’ words are obviously not complimentary. But those words spoken to the Canaanite woman are mild in comparison with some of the language that we find in the Bible. The divine judgment against sin strikes all people without partiality — Jew and Gentile, black and white and yellow, man and woman. None of us has, because of the family we were born into or our genes or our hard work, any prior claim on God.

Jesus uses far sharper language for some of the religious leaders of his own people than he does for any Gentile — hypocrites, the blind leading the blind, and so forth. In the next chapter of Matthew the leader of the disciples, Peter, will try to deflect the one he calls Messiah from taking the way of the cross and Jesus says “Get behind me, Satan.” Being called “Satan” is a good deal worse than being called a dog.

In Romans, Paul uses some harsh language directed not just at certain individuals but at everybody. “There is no one who is righteous, not even one.” “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of

God.” And if we’re inclined to argue with those judgments on ourselves, we can use Jesus’ summary of God’s Law to do a reality check: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Do we — *with all your heart?* “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Do we — *as yourself?*

What do I do when the law says, “You’re a sinner”? Well, I can say, “No, I’m not.” I can lower the scale and argue that I love God more than some things and usually try to obey him, and that I treat my neighbour decently, even if not as well as I treat myself. I can always find someone worse than myself and say that there’s the real sinner, or I can be very modern and deny the relevance of the whole concept of sin. I could say, “Yes, I’m a sinner but I’ll clean up my act and make up for my past mistakes.” I have the ability to be a righteous person in God’s sight. Maybe I’ll need some assistance from God but it’s not something that’s beyond my capacities. This is the response of standard brand religion. Or I could say to God, “Yes, I am a sinner. Help me.” That is the kind of response the Canaanite woman gives to Jesus’ words. She could have angrily denied what he said or promised to live a better life if he helped her but instead she simply repeats her plea for help. Perhaps I am a dog but even the dogs get fed. I have no claim on God but appeal entirely to the divine mercy.

Jesus does give her what she asks because, as he says, “Great is your faith!” How she may have heard of Jesus and the rumours that he was the Jewish Messiah we don’t know, but she began her appeal in faith with the words: “Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David.” Her trust is not placed in some general idea of deity but in the God of Israel and his Messiah. She continued to trust in him and his ability to help even when it looked as if her appeal were going to be turned down rudely.

God’s character is fundamentally one of love and mercy. That is stated often in the Old Testament and is revealed most fully in the life of Christ. The demands of the law and divine judgment are realities but they are not the deepest truth about God. When the law convicts you of sin, its purpose is to make you realize your need of the forgiveness and salvation that are freely available in Jesus Christ. That is what God wants. “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone” he says through the prophet Ezekiel. “Turn, then, and live.” I’m sure that it wasn’t easy for that woman to believe that a Jewish teacher would have any interest in helping her. Especially when we are conscious of something we’ve done wrong and are feeling guilty for our sin, it isn’t easy to believe that God is gracious and merciful. After all, we’ve already had to ask for forgiveness so often! God can forgive us even if we find it hard to forgive ourselves. We can “reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us,” says the First Letter of John, “for God is greater than our hearts.” The simple truth is that God really does love all people and finally doesn’t make any distinction between Jews and Canaanites, between those who appear to be righteous externally and those who don’t. God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” — and not just “everyone” as an abstraction but you and you and you and me. God’s salvation is there for the asking, for all who ask it in faith.

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