

The Fruitful Field of Lebanon
Matthew 15:21-28

To say that American public discourse has become a bit, well, coarse, is an obvious understatement. In order to attract more clicks, and thus more readers, even our most respected news outlets have become more than a little sensationalistic, abandoning any pretense of objectivity in the process. And the politicians who run for office have followed their example, calling those who disagree with them everything from “Neanderthals” to “deplorables.” But for Jesus to compare a woman to a dog, well, that’s a bit jarring. It seems so out of character.

So, who was this woman anyway? Mark’s version of this story says she was a Gentile, a Syrophenician, and Matthew agrees that she came from the area around Tyre and Sidon. So, why was Jesus talking with her? Because, for the only time in His earthly ministry, He had gone to that region. Jesus had thus gone to a place where He and His God were not only not respected, but where God’s people were roundly despised – a situation with which we American Christians are likely to grow more and more familiar.

For the fact is that the people of Tyre and Sidon were a lot like modern Americans. Because their economy centered on trade, they had access to the best of everything from all over the known world. Moreover, since they were seafaring people, they borrowed many of their religious ideas, and even some of the gods they worshipped from the many different cultures surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, they were wealthy, sophisticated, cosmopolitan pluralists, quite similar to the residents of our largest cities today, and quite different from the Jews who stayed on their farms and in their pasturelands, keeping to themselves, and insisting that there was only one True God.

But the people of Tyre and Sidon had also adopted a few religious practices from the Canaanites, the original inhabitants of the land of Israel – including temple prostitution and child sacrifice. Matthew specifically says that the woman who spoke to Jesus was a Canaanite, so it is quite likely that she had at least observed, if not participated in the horrible sorts of rituals that David describes as drink offerings of blood.

But let’s go a little further, for we know that whatever power the false gods these people worshipped may have had was actually demonic. And we know that this woman’s daughter was possessed by a devil, a demon, an unclean spirit. In sum, we know that this woman was part of a culture that sacrificed its children to demons, and we know that a demon had in fact come to live inside her daughter. It is thus very likely that she had gotten exactly what she and her neighbors had asked for.

And isn’t this the situation of so many people in America today? The big cities of the Northeast and the Far West are largely post-Christian – the Church is as forgotten there as it is despised. And because most of our mass media originates in those settings, that’s the worldview we hear on our radios and we see on our TV sets and on our movie screens. And much like Ancient Tyre and Sidon, this materialistic, cosmopolitan, pluralist, sex-crazed culture is as hostile to the best interests of children as it is hostile to the claims of Christ.

And as more of our politicians have adopted such a worldview, the social pathologies of this post-Christian culture are being imposed on the rest of America. First, the states were forbidden from encouraging school children to worship God. Then they were forced to allow abortion. And

most recently, the states have been compelled to celebrate and reward a form of behavior that bears no resemblance to God's plan for marriage.

And as these godless pathologies have spread, the victims have multiplied. And just as in Ancient Tyre and Sidon, most of them are children. Since the Roe v. Wade decision, over 60 million Americans have never had the chance to be born, slaughtered instead on the altar of sexual pleasure, material prosperity and personal convenience. Of those who have managed to survive until birth, around 40 percent have parents who aren't married – for black children, it's over 70 percent. In fact, 23% of all Americans under the age of 18 live with only one parent – that's 3 times the average in the rest of the world.

So, why does all that matter? Because social scientists tell us that fatherless families are the single biggest cause of poverty for children. Children from such homes are also much more likely to use illicit drugs, to engage in pre-marital sex, to be involved in gang violence – there's hardly any social disorder that can't be linked in one way or another to the breakdown of the family.

But even those children who are cared for by two loving parents have become the subjects of our culture's craze for electronic communication. Parked as they are in front of computer screens for hours at a time, we are already seeing disturbing trends in their cognitive development, as attention spans decrease and language and logical thinking skills atrophy. But with the average American spending over 5 hours a day interacting with their mobile phones, is anyone even noticing?

In short, like this Canaanite woman, our materialist, pluralist, sex-crazed, distracted, post-Christian culture is, in large measure, getting what it has asked for. And like her demon-possessed daughter, it is still the children – both born and unborn – who are all too often the victims of their parents' callousness and cruelty.

So, perhaps Jesus' startling response to this woman wasn't so much cruel as it was a penetrating, and quite justified indictment of her culture. For after all, Jesus was not just a Jewish rabbi, a devotee of the only true religion in the world. He was not only someone Who lived a perfectly selfless, holy life, Someone Who welcomed children to come to Him and who devoted Himself to restoring life and health whenever He could. He was therefore not just in a position in which He could sit in judgment on this woman and her culture without the slightest shred of hypocrisy. For He was not only a worshipper of the One and Only True God. He was, in fact God Almighty.

And today's passage is part of a very clear demonstration of that fact. Remember, as we studied the first part of Matthew 15 last week, we saw that Jesus responded to the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees by drawing their attention to Isaiah 29, saying that they were teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. And in the rest of Matthew 15 and the first part of chapter 16, Jesus goes on to act out the marvelous works that Isaiah says God will do in response to such blind, clueless leaders.

For in today's passage Jesus goes to Lebanon, the region of Tyre and Sidon, making it a fertile field by displaying His gracious power just as Isaiah says in verse 17. In next week's passage, Matthew 15:29-31, Jesus will go on to heal all sorts of people, just as Isaiah predicted in verse 18. And in the last part of chapter 15, Matthew will describe how Jesus fed 4000 families, thus fulfilling the words of Isaiah in verse 19 – "the afflicted also shall increase their gladness in the Lord, and the needy of mankind shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel."

For that's the point of all the miracles Jesus did, isn't it? He wasn't just showing the people that He was a powerful prophet. No, He was acting out the Word of God to prove that He is nothing less than the Holy One of Israel, the Divine Messiah, the Lord.

So if that's Who Jesus is, the Son of God, the One Who is perfectly holy, perfectly righteous and perfectly just, why should He do any favors for this Canaanite woman. Why should He help someone whose culture by definition had despised and rejected Him? Why should He pour out material blessings on someone who would just turn around and give the credit to Baal or Astoreth? Wouldn't blessing such unbelievers just be enabling their bad behavior? Why shouldn't He allow this Canaanite and her daughter to experience the consequences of her wickedness?

So let's look again at Jesus' words, at how Jesus reacts to this Canaanite woman's request. For His words are clearly a test, aren't they? No, Jesus wasn't challenging her faith in His ability as a miracle worker, for she wouldn't have come to ask Him to heal her daughter if she hadn't acknowledged His power. In fact, it wouldn't have been a stretch for any worshipper of many gods to admit that Jesus had the power to heal, while still looking to other gods for other things, like money or happiness. No, just asking Jesus for a favor didn't necessarily mean this woman was putting her whole faith in Him.

And many non-Christians continue to do this today, don't they? Many homeless people are happy to go to the soup kitchens and clothes closets that urban churches provide, only to leave and resume their lives of irresponsibility and drug abuse. Receiving material help from the Church is not the same as receiving Christ, is it?

And don't we who call ourselves Christians all too often do the same thing? Haven't we all, at one time or another, asked Jesus to get us out of the trouble that our own sinful behavior has caused? And after He has helped us, how often have we gone right back to our old sinful ways? In contrast, how often has our confession of sin been truly accompanied by repentance, by turning away from sin?

Yes, that's exactly why Jesus challenges this woman with such harsh words. For in order for her to accept the truth of his insulting statement about children and dogs, she would have to do more than just admit that Jesus had power. She would have to do more than just admit that the God of the Jews was real. She would have to admit that the Jews were in fact God's children, God's chosen people, the only ones who deserved any blessings from the only true God. She would also have to admit that in contrast that her own proud and wealthy culture was worthless and that her own religious traditions were phony – that the wealthy, cosmopolitan, materialistic people of Tyre and Sidon were really nothing more than a pack of dogs fighting over table scraps.

In other words, to accept Jesus' words, this Canaanite woman would have to reject her pagan faith. She would have to turn away from any hope she might have placed in money or sex or religious rituals to solve her problems. She would have to reject all her pride in her culture and her traditions. She would have to reject pluralism, the idea that there are many gods, many different equally valid truth claims. In short, she would have to humble herself completely before Jesus and His God.

And that's what we Christians are called to do as well, for there's only room for One God on the throne of our hearts. If we claim the name of Christ, we can't go on looking anywhere else for purpose and meaning and fulfillment in our lives. We can't worship Jesus for an hour on Sunday morning, and then worship our jobs or our families, our pleasures or our entertainments during the rest of the week. If God is our God, He must be God all the time – our only measure of truth, our

only lawgiving King, the only One we follow, the only One to Whom all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength, all our love is given.

And if we can't look in the mirror and honestly tell ourselves that Jesus really is all the world to us, more important to us than anything else, if we can't say with David that the Lord is the portion of our inheritance and our cup, and thus that we would choose Christ instead of all the material and relational blessings of this world, then we are no better than the post-Christian, materialist, sex-crazed pluralists we evangelicals love to despise. For in probing this Canaanite woman with such a loaded, humiliating comment, that's exactly the choice Jesus was forcing her to make.

But the good news is that she made the right choice. She listened to Jesus' humiliating words and completely humbled herself before Him. She not only rejected all her pride in her pagan culture. She not only accepted the superiority of the Jews as the rightful recipients of God's covenant promises. She acknowledged that she personally didn't deserve anything from Jesus, even table scraps. Instead, she firmly believed that just some crumbs that might have been accidentally dropped from the table of His power would be enough to bring healing into her daughter's life. And in all His power, in all His grace, Jesus rewarded her faith.

And if that's where you are today, you can have the same hope. If you truly repent, turning away from yourself, away from anyone or anything else to which you might be looking for hope and help and healing, if you have given up any efforts to restore your own spiritual condition and instead look to Christ alone as your Savior, and if you have truly bowed the knee to Christ, acknowledging Him as Lord of every area of your life, you can have the same assurance. For the same God Who cast out the unclean spirit from this undeserving Canaanite woman's daughter, is the same God Who pours His Holy Spirit into the hearts of undeserving sinners today, the same God Whom David confessed will show us the path of life, the One in Whose presence fullness of joy and eternal pleasure can be found.

So will we cast ourselves completely on the Lord's mercy and His grace? Will we trust in Christ alone to preserve us and to guide us? Will we truly surrender all that we are and all that we have to Him?