

Section 37

JESUS HEALS A SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN'S  
DEMONIZED DAUGHTER

(Parallel: Mark 7:24-30)

TEXT: 15:21-28

21 And Jesus went out thence, and withdrew into the parts of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And behold, a Canaanitish woman came out from those borders, and cried, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a demon.

23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.

24 But he answered and said, I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

25 But she came and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.

26 But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs.

27 But she said, Yea, Lord: for even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it done unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was healed from that hour.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. It would appear that a person, who desired to be known by as many of the world's people as possible, would go where the most people are, especially those who would be prepared to grasp his message. (See Jn. 7:3f.) But here Jesus deliberately leaves Palestine for Phoenicia seeking PRIVACY. (Mk. 7:24) How do you account for this apparent inconsistency in Jesus' conduct?
- b. Though Jesus sought privacy, "He could not be hid." How do you explain this?
- c. Mark says that the Syrophenician woman "heard of Him." How would she have heard about Jesus?
- d. Why do you suppose this Gentile woman addressed Jesus by that strictly Jewish title: "Son of David"? What could she possibly understand by the use of such a title?

- e. Is it not courteous to reply when spoken to? Yet Jesus did not answer her one word. How do you account for such conduct?
- f. Can you explain how Jesus could be so anxious to speak to the Samaritan woman but was so reluctant to take time for the Syro-phenician?
- g. How do you account for the disciples' insistence that Jesus "send her away"? Had not Jesus helped Gentiles before? Had they themselves not learned to show merciful helpfulness to those in need? What could have motivated these closest followers of Jesus to talk this way?
- h. After Jesus explained to the woman His basic mission to earth, why then did she not leave? Was there something in His manner that indicated to her that, when He said "no," He really meant "yes"?
- i. By implication of Jesus' figure of speech, He was calling the woman a dog. Do you think this was right? Is not this kind of treatment cruel? Do you think it right to tax this poor woman's feelings this way?
- j. Why is Jesus so overjoyed at the greatness of this woman's faith? What is so unusual about her faith that makes it great in Jesus' judgment?
- k. Although no text specifically describes the activity of Jesus and His Apostles during this journey outside of Palestine, after considering not only the events that immediately preceded the trip as well as the critical moments in the larger context, would you suggest what Jesus and His men might possibly have done while gone from Palestine? What specific needs could this trip have met, that, until the journey was made, could not have been satisfied?
- l. After explaining to the woman His basic mission to earth, which limited Him to the Jews, why then did Jesus go ahead and cast the demon out of this Gentile woman's daughter? What would you think if Jesus had absolutely refused? What would the Apostles or the woman have thought?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus and His disciples went away from the area around Capernaum and withdrew completely out of Galilee to the foreign district of Phoenicia around Tyre and Sidon. There He entered into a house because He would have liked to remain incognito. But to remain

hidden proved impossible, for a Canaanite woman from that region, whose young daughter was possessed by an unclean demon, heard about Him. Now the woman was a Greek, or pagan, and Syro-phoenician by birth. Right away she approached Him, calling out, "Have pity on me, Lord, David's Son: my daughter is severely tormented by an unclean demon!"

But Jesus gave her no reply—not one word.

So His followers crowded around Him urging, "Do send her away, Lord, because she is continuing to follow us shouting."

Jesus objected, "But I was sent to help the Jews, not the Gentiles."

But the woman came around in front of Jesus, fell to her knees at His feet, begging Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. She pleaded, "Help me, Lord!"

To this Jesus answered, "Let the children first be fed! It is not right, you know, to take the children's bread and throw it to the puppies."

"Yes, Lord, however, even the little dogs under the table eat the children's scraps that fall from their masters' table."

"Lady, you've got a lot of faith! For an answer like that, what you desired shall be done for you! You may go home content, because the demon has already left your daughter."

Thus was her daughter healed instantly. Her mother went home and found her child lying quietly in bed, the demon gone.

## SUMMARY

Travelling incognito in Phoenicia, Jesus and His Apostles encountered a mother whose daughter was demonized. Jesus preferred anonymity, but the woman recognized Him and immediately sought His supernatural aid in behalf of her daughter. Jesus parried her pleas with the objection that the purpose of His ministry was primarily in behalf of the Jewish people, even though this Gentile woman had called Him the Christ. She insisted. He seems to object again, but leaves the door open to further appeal, since He neither sent her away nor flatly refused to help. She seized upon a part of a figure of speech He had used, turning it to her credit. Admiring her motherly determination and indomitable confidence in His ability, Jesus granted her request. Instantly the demon departed from the daughter, leaving her in peace, resting in bed.

## NOTES

## WHAT IS MATTHEW UP TO NOW?

No Bible student may forget that each of the Gospel writers is independent of the others, even though much of what he includes shares striking verbal similarities with that recorded by the others. This fact raises the question concerning the purpose for each author's including this or that fact, as well as the significance of certain unusual omissions or inclusions. Even as the Apostolic Epistles were written to deal with needs in the early Church, the Evangelists intend to present a picture of the Lord Jesus that will not only be adequate for all time, but will meet needs in their own century. This is why only the Holy Spirit can be the editor-in-chief of these materials, because only He is sufficiently far-sighted to know what will accomplish these two divergent purposes.

Now, while it is certainly true that the Hebrew Christians and those yet unconverted Jews of the first century would need to grasp the universality of the Christian Gospel, is it necessary or even possible to see in each single difference between the two narratives we have of this event, some key to the individual emphasis of Matthew or Mark? For example:

1. Is the fact significant that Matthew, not Mark, records Jesus' affirmation: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"? (15:24)
2. Is it important that Matthew does not say, with Mark: "Let the children (Jews) first be fed"? After all, if Matthew's point is to teach precisely this conclusion that the Gospel is for the Jews first and then for the Gentile, how could he have omitted it? Or, did he, as a wise master teacher, prefer to suggest the conclusion without stating it? (See notes before 8:18: "What Is This Text Doing Here?")
3. Is it true that Matthew's quotation: "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," while also quoted by Mark, since it stands alone in Matthew's context with Jesus' earlier statement of His Jewish mission (v. 24), leads to the conclusion that the pagans have no right to help whatever? If so, upon first reading, such a view would have been acceptable to the Jewish reader. Nevertheless, the whole impact of Matthew's entire section is the moral impossibility of being deaf to their cry.

4. Matthew, not Mark, cites Jesus' praise of this Gentile woman's faith (v. 28), whereas Mark emphasizes the brilliance of her trusting response with no special mention of her faith.
5. Of less importance is Matthew's omission to mention that Jesus entered a house in a heathen land (cf. Ac. 10:28; 11:3), because not even Mark who mentions it affirms that it was a pagan's house, since it could have been one belonging to a Jew living in Phoenicia.
6. Whereas Mark, using normal Jewish parlance, describes the woman as a "Greek," which would mean "gentile" to anyone even distantly familiar with the paganizing influences of Hellenism in Israel and would remind the orthodox of the nationalistic struggles of the Maccabean period, yet it is Matthew that calls the woman a "Canaanite," a word almost impossible to overload with connotations: "pagan, ignorant, godless, superstitious, damned Gentile."

Whatever the details, that Matthew should have seized upon this one incident to illustrate Jesus' trip abroad, merits attention because of His meaningful encounter with this non-Hebrew. Because of the apparently casual nature of this meeting, it would be risky to affirm that He was laying the foundation for later evangelization among the Gentiles. His personal intention is another. (See Mk. 7:24.) However, Matthew's inclusion of this incident, because of the evident trust of this woman in the Hebrew Messiah, would undoubtedly argue the rightness of including also others of "like precious faith" in God's Kingdom, even though they be of heathen background.

This is evidence for seeing the proper place of this narrative in the general Matthaean apologetic for the place of Gentiles in the New Israel. Whereas Jesus intended to initiate no personal mission to the Gentiles, as He Himself indicates in the text, still His reactions demonstrated toward them an openness that taught Matthew to open his heart to them too. Now, the cosmopolitan outlook of this Apostle gently nudges his "kinsmen according to the flesh" to reconsider their understanding of the Messiah. Though this entire period spent by the Lord outside of Palestine probably offered excellent opportunities to give the most concentrated attention and teaching He was ever able to provide His Apostles in private, nevertheless, Matthew leaves that possibility entirely out of the picture. Rather, he deliberately records for his readers just this one incident,—and the lady and her daughter are CANAANITES! This fact might sail over the heads of Gentile readers, but it could hardly do less than stun

a Hebrew leaving him wide-eyed with wonder in the presence of a universal Messiah. (See on 15:22.) A Gentile Christian might impatiently ask, "Couldn't Matthew have played down her unsavory past and gotten on with the Gospel?" Matthew seems to answer: "But this is Gospel! When the Messiah of Israel blesses a Canaanite, this is the most glorious news I can think of! When the Servant of Jehovah becomes the servant of the servant of servants, what glorious grace and mercy must be available to men!" (Study Gen. 9:25-27; 10:6, 15.)

Another direct connection Matthew may intend is that between the preceding discussion with the Pharisees about ritual purity and (by implication) clean and unclean foods, and this section that deals with unclean and defiling people. This same approach is used by God in teaching the Jewish Peter to admit Gentiles into the Kingdom. He does this by first demanding that the Apostle eat unclean food and then sends him to unclean people. (To appreciate this relationship, study the [to us] odd connections between Peter's vision and the conclusions he drew from it. Acts 10:14f, 28, 34f) This, then, is the type of argument that Matthew's Jewish readers could best appreciate and arrive at the right conclusion: if ritual purity is not the main issue, and if the heart purity is the essential, it may be true, then, that even Gentiles, who know nothing of Levitical ceremonies, but who have genuinely pure hearts and trust the God of Israel, may be considered clean and candidates for membership in the New Israel too.

Beyond Matthew's personal purpose for including this section, we should also enjoy the psychological study this narrative provides for examining the interplay of personality as Jesus deals with this woman, and as she deals with Jesus. Stay alert, because He MAY deal with us in just this same way!

#### SITUATION: JESUS DESIRES PRIVACY (15:21; Mk. 7:24)

15:21 **And Jesus went out thence, and withdrew.** (*exelthòn ekeîthen ho Iesoûs anechôresen*) Reasons for this strategic journey must be decided in the light of His larger situation. (Mt. 13-17. See notes on 14:1, 13, where Jesus' problem and plan are more fully discussed.)

1. His primary reason: "And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and would

not have anyone know. Yet he could not be hid." (Mk. 7:24) From this it is concluded that He desired privacy, not merely from the Jews whose land He had left, but even from the Gentiles in whose country He now sojourned. Out of this grow the following surmises:

2. The entire band needed relaxation from the strenuous activities of the preceding weeks: the evangelization of Galilee, the feeding of the five thousand, the emotional strain after the murder of John the Baptist, the concern about Herod Antipas' undesirable curiosity about Jesus, the pressure of the Pharisees' attacks, the unbelief of the people.
3. The Twelve needed opportunity to evaluate their own evangelistic attempts concluded just before the climax and collapse of Jesus' Galilean ministry. Before this there had been no significant time for that.
4. The Twelve needed relief from the pressures of Israel's majority rejection of Jesus as Messiah, so they could more objectively weigh Israel's unbelief against the total picture of their Master's unassailable prophetic credentials.
5. Since Jesus had dealt with Tyrians and Sidonians before, even if these were Jewish residents of Phoenicia (cf. Mk. 3:7; Lk. 6:17), could He have realistically hoped to travel through that region with the Twelve and remain unrecognized? This consideration renders it difficult to exclude a half-veiled intention to show by this one incident that, while His mission was specifically to the Hebrews, nevertheless His blessing and power is eventually for the Gentiles also. Morgan (*Matthew*, 202) may be right to suggest:

Perhaps He took His disciples there that they might see the thing He had not been able to show them in the midst of His own people with their traditionalism and ritualism; that *they* might see faith working free and untrammelled; and as He took them there He revealed to them the force of faith in contrast with the barrenness of ritualism.

Could He not have foreseen that "He could not be hid" (Mk. 7:24) and forestalled any and all contact with needy pagans, had He really wanted to avoid that? If so, then His desire to remain in the background is directly related to His intention NOT to begin a foreign-based Gentile ministry, while any personal contacts are to be exceptional.

**Tyre and Sidon** are located roughly fifty miles south of Beirut, Lebanon. This is Jesus' second physical presence in a foreign country, occasioned now, as upon His flight to Egypt (Mt. 2), by the suspicion of a Herodian king and the lack of spirituality among God's people. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 37f) disagrees that Jesus is out of Israel, because:

1. Jesus withdrew from the Capernaum area to "the borders of Tyre and Sidon" but did not cross the border. (See Mk. 7:24.)
2. He "entered into a house" which would undoubtedly be a Jewish home. (Cf. Ac. 10:28; Mt. 8:8)
3. The Canaanitish woman "came out from those borders" to seek Jesus' help in extreme northern Galilee. (Mt. 15:22)

However, none of these arguments are conclusive because:

1. While Mark's *tà hōria* does mean "boundaries," however in our literature it is used exclusively in the plural to mean "region, district." (Arndt-Gingrich, 584f; cf. Mt. 2:16; 4:13; 8:34; 15:22, 39; 19:1; Mk. 5:17; 7:31b; 10:1; Ac. 13:50) If interpreted strictly as "borders," all these cases would prove that the events narrated occurred on the border, never within the given district. But these are not "borderline cases"! Further, Matthew's *tà mère* agrees perfectly with this understanding, since his *tà mère* refers to "the parts of a country, hence, region, district" (Arndt-Gingrich, 507; cf. Mt. 2:22; 16:13; Mk. 8:10; Ac. 2:10; 20:2)
2. Who, in the light of the vastness of the Dispersion, can prove there were no Jewish homes outside of Palestine? (Ac. 2:5-11; 14:21) On the other hand, to avoid the need for Gentile hospitality, could not Jesus have hired a house for His stay? Were there no funds at His disposal? (Cf. Lk. 8:3 and notes on 14:16)
3. The Greek word order of Mt. 15:22 may well represent a quite different nuance captured by the RSV: "A Canaanite woman from that region came out." "Came out" refers; not to her departure from Phoenicia, but from her own home in that area in which Jesus now finds Himself.
4. Mark (7:31) is conclusive geographic evidence that Jesus is definitely out of Israel, because Jesus "returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon" (*élthen dià Sidōnos*), hence traveled even further north from Tyre before turning back eastward and south toward the Decapolis. (See on 15:29.)



I. THE REQUEST BY FAITH (15:22)

15:22 **And behold, a Canaanitish woman came out.** Sidon is one of the most ancient Canaanite cities in the world. (Gen. 10:15-19) Compare the history of Elijah in this same territory during a period of great Jewish unbelief where he too found great faith in another Syrophoenician woman (1 Kg. 17). That well-known event in Hebrew history should mitigate the surprise of pious Hebrews who would be tempted to be offended by the Messiah's travels and sharing God's gracious power beyond the physical limits of Israel. (Lk. 4:24-26)

- A. Her request came out of the depth of her distress:
1. The failure of her pagan religion to meet the crisis of her demonized daughter only exacerbated her disgust for its empty, powerless idolatry. Her pagan faith had sufficed until that dark day when only REAL power could answer her need. The presence of the demonic in the little Gentile girl provides further evidence of the objective reality of demons, because not limited by nation, age or sex of their victims.
  2. Her own vicarious suffering was great in proportion to the love she felt for her child. (Cf. Mark's picturesque *thugàtrion*: "little daughter.")
  3. She had to come alone, unable even to bring her afflicted child before Jesus so as better to be able to plead the depth of her need by showing Him the distressed girl personally.
- B. Her request came despite the distinct disadvantages of her position:
1. She is a woman. Could she have known about Jewish prejudices that frowned upon a woman's talking with a rabbi, or the reluctance of a common rabbi to be addressed by a woman? (Cf. Jn. 4:7-9, 27) Still, she approached THIS Rabbi, confident that He is potentially so much more than the run-of-the-mill Jewish teacher, calling Him "Lord, Son of David."
  2. She, a Gentile, came to this Jew:
    - a. She was Greek by culture and language, but to Hebrews, mindful of the earlier Maccabean struggles against the paganizing tendencies of Hellenism, "Greek" means "pagan." (Cf. Ro. 1:13-16; 2:9f; 1 Co. 1:22-24)
    - b. She was Syrophoenician because of the geographical position of her home. Syro-phoenicia means that part of Phoenician domain that lies west of Syria and is connected with it, as opposed to Phoenician colonies of Lybia, or Libophoenicia.)

- c. She was a Canaanite by ancestry, and perhaps also by religion. This fact inserted into a Jewish Gospel rings alarm bells everywhere, because she is a remnant of the accursed race of Baal-worshippers with which Israel was to have absolutely NO DEALINGS. (Gen. 9:25-27; 10:6, 15; Ex. 23:23-33; 34:11-16; Dt. 7:1-5, 16; 20:16-18)
3. Her right to petition Jesus was very much in doubt and only negatively admitted:
    - a. He did not answer her (15:23), but no answer is better than no.
    - b. He did not send her away as urged by the disciples. (15:23)
    - c. He did not admit her prior privilege to receive His help, but having said that others came first, He did not deny she came second. (Mk. 7:27)
- C. Her request is based upon some knowledge of Jesus, however meager.
1. Whereas Jesus' intention was to gain privacy, someone recognized Him anyway. To imagine that some residents of Phoenicia had been present to hear the Sermon on the Mount and go home amazed to tell about it and Him is not difficult. (Cf. Lk. 6:17; Mk. 3:7) However much we would wish it otherwise, this incident provides no firm basis for believing in a widespread Gentile expectation of a Jewish Messiah, that is, an expectation totally unconnected with Jewish expectations based on prophecy. Mark (7:25) says she "having heard about Him . . . came," without stating how or from whom she learned it. It is more likely that some Jewish neighbor living in her Phoenician town told her what they had learned on their festal trips to Israel. (Cf. 2 Kg. 5:2-4)
  2. The address with which she presented her case to Jesus is not the sort of appellative to be expected in the mouth of a totally ignorant, superstitious pagan. Just how much understanding does it reveal she had? This would probably depend upon the testimony of those (Jewish?) fellow-citizens who informed her about Jesus: did they use this title with all the understanding we expect of spiritual Jews, hence, did they communicate to her something of Jesus' great mission?
    - a. Lenski (*Matthew*, 594) suggests that "when the woman combines 'Lord' with 'son of David,' she understands 'Lord' in the higher sense as being in fact the Messianic title . . ." (But see on 15:25.)

- b. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 39) believes that she could not have had full spiritual understanding of the world-wide bearing of the Davidic promises, or of the world-embracing designation of the Messiah as the Son of David. Hence, **Son of David** may have been for her but a popular, political title that certainly elevated Jesus to earthly power and glory as a supremely powerful man, but, because it was devoid of the rich content such a title must express to be used rightfully, it treated Him as a political, Jewish superman. However, Jesus helped others who had not all that understanding. (Mt. 9:27; 12:23; 20:30f)
- c. Unfortunately for her, to call Him all that this title implies can never make her a member of the covenant people. If He is really **Son of David**, the Messiah of Israel, then she can claim no rights inherent in her use of that title, because she is not Hebrew. Mere use of glorious, complimentary titles as such can never guarantee her participation in the covenantal relationship to Abraham—i.e. unless, by an expression of great faith, she prove that she possesses that dependence upon Jesus that would constitute her a true daughter of Abraham by faith. (Cf. Ro. 4:11, 16) If so, then she would be amply qualified to receive anything destined for those who hail Him **Lord, Son of David**. But until this latter truth is fully evident, by the terms of His own mandate and because of the confusion He would cause by appearing to reverse His position taken in Israel against uninformed appeal to His messianic powers without appreciation of His true messianic identity and Lordship, He cannot grant her request.

## II. THE RELENTLESSNESS OF FAITH (15:23-27; Mk. 7:27f)

15:23 **But he answered her not a word** is totally contradictory to what we would have expected from a tender, compassionate Savior, who, without compromise to His Jewish mission could have symbolically pictured the future universality of His Kingdom by responding positively and instantly to her request. In fact, would not His positive response to this appeal for help from Israel's Messiah be the better type of that future expansion into all the world? This very feature that, at first, disappoints our expectation is another evidence that our story is not the sort of thing Christian sentiment would have

dreamed up. Rather, it demonstrates that in our hands is no dubious tradition or Christian myth, but authentic history. Its authenticity, in turn, invites us to dig deeper to discover whether our disappointment be groundless or not.

**He answered her not a word.** Some object to the explanation of Jesus' attitude as intended to test the woman, because incompatible with His divine purity and rectitude, especially should she, in her weaknesses, have failed the test. But this underevaluates Jesus by supposing that He would not have mercifully come to her rescue, as He did in the case of Jairus (Mk. 5:35f; Lk. 8:49f) or that of Peter (Mt. 14:30f) or that of the nine Apostles (Mt. 17:16ff). Is it more credible that Jesus should not have helped even this smoldering wick of faith, however ignorant or unqualified? (Cf. Mt. 12:20) And, for the perfection of her understanding and faith, who can say that Jesus cannot use precisely a method that seems an unspeakably cruel trial, but, because He knows how far He can test, proves to be precisely the best means of teaching her what she must learn and leading her to greater heights of faith?

It is a wrong view of God that supposes that He cannot, or does not, try us by delaying answers to prayer or by acting in some way that appears to us to be His willing affliction or His disguising His loving purposes for us, in order to produce some effect in us. It is also a limited understanding about God that fails to appreciate His love to be wrestled with by His people. (Cf. Abraham, Gen. 18:16-33; Jacob, Gen. 32:22-30; Moses, Nu. 14:11-20; Ex. 32:9-14, 31-35)

A. Her **RESOLUTION** remained undaunted by Jesus' seeming indifference and her apparent temporary failure.

1. Unsatisfied to cry to Him from afar once or twice, she continued to appeal.

a. The perplexed disciples, aware of Jesus' purpose for this journey and His desire for anonymity, probably worry about the woman's continual shouting, since her calling attention to the presence of the *Son of David* in this area could easily compromise everything Jesus intended to accomplish toward the training of the Twelve. Ironically, however, part of their discipline must consist in the lesson that showing compassion upon a needy person who is a nuisance just to get rid of them is not Christian compassion. Nevertheless, His silence is so unlike Jesus that the Twelve immediately notice it and are

openly embarrassed by it.

- b. The disciples' solution is to urge the Lord to send her away. Even though they counsel the Lord to end her persistent, nerve-racking pleading, their advice is not entirely heartless, because the men probably remember that Jesus had helped Gentiles before. (Mt. 8:7ff) So it would not be wholly unreasonable to expect Him to be merciful to this foreign woman too. If so, not totally unsympathetic to her cries, they excitedly advise the Master to get it over with, cast out the demon and send her on her way. Their intercession, even in this negative way, encourages her to hope.
  - c. His seeming discouragement served only to intensify the warmth of her pleading (15:25). How long did she follow this group of thirteen men down the road, attracting attention to herself as she cried after Him? Her determination is being tested to the limit by these circumstances.
2. This quick-witted mother noticed that Jesus, in ignoring the Apostles' complaint, offers her a glimmer of hope. If she dare not hope that "silence gives consent," at least His silence was not a cold nor final refusal. It may also be that His own unruffled manner, despite His seeming stand-off attitude, and the total absence of any evidence of displeasure at her insistence, communicated more to her than His reported words tell us.
  3. Jesus demands simply that all embrace the divine plan for His personal mission. (Cf. Ro. 15:8f)

15:24 **But he answered and said, I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.** This answer is addressed primarily to the Twelve who urge Him to send her away. On the assumption that they counsel Him to grant her request so as to hurry her away, Jesus is seen as explaining to them why He should not grant it without clearing up the essential issue involved. If their advice be based upon Jesus' miraculous help and limited sharing of His truth with Gentiles and Samaritans prior to this event (as e.g. Mt. 8:5ff; Jn. 4:7ff, 42), in those cases, however, His Jewish mandate had not been in doubt, probably because He was then within the physical borders of Israel. Here, on the other hand, He is in Gentile country.

**I was . . . sent . . . unto the lost . . . of Israel.** This is the definite principle and the proper method guiding His ministry, divinely determined for the purpose of bringing it to a successful and right conclusion. This is why it is not easy to ignore it. Yet it could be

departed from, if the reason were valid to justify it. It was not an inviolable law admitting of no exceptions. Nevertheless, because of its fundamental character, it could not be ignored, except for unusual circumstances. Whether or not this situation qualifies as exceptional, had not yet been demonstrated.

**I was not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.** This is true in two senses:

1. My personal mission is only to the Jews in the sense that I will live, work and die among them only. My followers will evangelize the Gentiles too, but the peculiar demands of my mission limit my work to the Jews, in order to guarantee salvation to all. For this reason I cannot labor extensively among Samaritans or Gentiles until my mission to Israel will have been fully executed. This is the tactic of limited objectives. Time is too precious to permit me to neglect the very people whom God has been preparing for centuries for just this moment when I may win and train Hebrew disciples to become missionaries to the entire world. (Indications of His sense of world mission are: Jn. 10:16-18; cf. 11:52; 12:32; 17:20f.) Further, any extensive ministry among pagans could so alienate my precious Hebrew following that all past teaching would be lost. (Study the continuing racial problems in the life of the early Church to appreciate Jesus' practical dilemma here.) Some fail to see that Jesus' motive for refusal to enlarge His ministry to include Gentiles would have prevented His acceptability as Messiah to the Jews, since, they say, His nation had already rejected Him. But this objection overlooks the prejudices and limited understanding of those genuine disciples who had truly accepted Him, but still could not accept the evangelization of Gentiles. (Cf. Peter in Ac. 10; 11:15; Gal. 2)
2. Figuratively: only those who are willing to become *lost sheep of the house of Israel*, can come under the terms of my mission. That is, if you really understand that the Davidic reign and the promises include Gentiles too, if you confess your lostness without the grace of the God of Abraham, and if you admit your trust in anything He reveals, then you can enjoy the right to call me "Son of David" in its fullest sense and reap the benefits of your confession. In fact, you, too, will have thus become a true child of Abraham by faith. This explanation, however, stretches the literal use of the phrase which definitely limited the evangelistic outreach of the Apostles when Jesus sent them to preach just a few weeks earlier.

(Mt. 10:5f) Hence, to have expected any Gentile to understand this extended sense is asking too much comprehension on their part.

While Jesus' answer is primarily directed to the Twelve, it is for her ears too, because she must probe her own understanding of the situation: "You call me *Son of David*? Then you admit that I am the Messiah of Israel. Since you are not a Jewess, how can I help you?" Jesus insists that the woman recognize the sacred distinction between God's chosen people and all others. This is not racism, but reality, since it helps her to recognize that "salvation is of the Jews" (Jn. 4:22). In fact God had already spent two thousand years to develop a system of belief, a vocabulary of faith and an understanding of God upon which men of all nations could set their hopes and by which they could recognize the incarnate Messiah when He came. It has now come to its fruition in Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of ISRAEL, and men must come to Him and be united together in the New Israel, if they are to receive the blessing for which they yearn.

Is Jesus TESTING this woman at all? It is doubtful that He intended so to test her patience as to make her value His blessing, because His arguments are theologically, not psychologically, oriented. He does not doubt her objective sincerity nor argue against the rightness or depth of her motherly concern. Rather, He argues against His own subjective right to extend the terms of His own personal mission and mandate to include Gentiles. His objections are right and proper within themselves, even if He should never grant her request. It is a matter of tactics that His ministry had to be severely limited to accomplish the specific goals of His incarnation, and this meant strategic limitations of His efforts to Israel. Thus, the blessing of any Gentile, who happened to come into contact with Him, was purely incidental to His main purpose. Nevertheless, despite the primary thrust of these objections, whereby He explains to all present why He cannot consider an extensive Gentile ministry, the very act of stating these reasons produced in the Syrophoenician a secondary result: they tested her understanding and her determination to continue. In fact, since these objections do not categorically refuse her, she is left free to respond to them as she will. The sense and flow of this conversation may be outlined as follows:

- a. Lord, Son of David, help me!
- b. But my mission is to the Jews.
- c. Lord, help me!

- d. My mission is properly and primarily to the Jews.
- e. I accept your mission and see my place in it.
- f. Good, I'll help you!

Notice, therefore, that, because He graciously condescended to teach her what she must know in order rightly to call Him *Son of David*, and because He has already begun the lesson, there is more real mercy in His refusal than in the Apostles' well-meaning advice to ignore the lesson, get on with the healing and hustle her away, so terminating the embarrassing situation. They intend only to relieve a temporary aggravation to themselves. The Lord is already at work to save a soul for eternity!

Further, His tender affection for His own nation and His single-minded determination to save His people from their sins, revealed in the expression (15:24), underscores His deep Shepherd's care and concern for their lost condition. (Study Mt. 1:21; 9:36; 10:5; Cf. Lk. 19:41ff) Though these words are intended for Jewish ears and Jewish readers, they certainly cater to no nationalistic prejudices, for they imply the damnation of the Hebrew flock: they are the *LOST* sheep of Israel's house. So, unless a given Hebrew says to Jesus: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant, for I do not forget thy commandments." (Psa. 119:176), he cannot be saved. This establishes once more the righteous condemnation of the self-righteous who have no need for Jesus! (See on 9:13.)

B. Her *RESERVE* is shown by her proper humility, despite the rightness of her request and the painful desperation of her need, should Christ refuse. 15:25 **But she came and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.**

1. She always recognized Jesus as *Lord* in all her addresses. Her own understanding of the word may well not equal what a Christian now means when he confesses "Jesus as Lord to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:10f; 1 Co. 12:3; Ro. 10:9) Nevertheless, her considerate humility requires of her that she address Him as "Sir," whether she knew all about His true authority or not. On the other hand, when she couples *Lord* with "Son of David," she may mean to acknowledge His true Lordship.
2. She did not argue with Him whether His Messiahship ought to be international or not, however biased or prejudicial His affirmation of His Jewish mandate may have sounded to her.



Rather than argue, **she came and worshipped him**. Mark (7:25) notes: "She came and fell down at his feet" (*elthoûsa prosépesen pròs tous pòdas autoû*), as if she had been following (cf. Mt. 15:23), crying after Jesus, and now runs around ahead of the group, practically blocking their passage by kneeling before Him. She apparently just could not permit herself to entertain the opinion that He was a sectarian Savior, however rightly His mission be directed toward the Hebrew people.

3. She focused attention, not on her nation, but upon the crying need of her single human problem: "Help ME!" At this point she has dropped the Jewish title, "Son of David," as though she recognized her lack of right to use that nomenclature. Even this seemingly desperate act is not devoid of genuine faith, because where her lack of qualification is greatest, she hurls her case, her lack of qualification—herself at Jesus' feet, as if to say, "Lord, help me to qualify!" If this is not total, believing dependence upon His grace, what could be? If this is not the finest expression of Abrahamic faith that qualifies one as a child of Abraham, what could be?
4. She could focus others' attention upon her problem, because it was so much at the center of her own. This woman, as Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 136) puts it: "had the one supremely effective quality in prayer—she was in deadly earnest. Prayer for her was no ritual form; it was the outpouring of the passionate desire of her soul, which somehow felt that she could not—and must not—and need not—take no for an answer." When one knows he can turn to no other for help, he wastes no idle words in expressing his urgent need.

15:26 **And he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs.** Since the following evidences prove that Jesus knew all along what He was doing, we can stop worrying whether His methods seem right and loving or not:

1. Although He had earlier answered her not even a word (15:23), His statements proved He had been listening and understood her pleas.
2. Although He gave her no direct encouragement to continue, still He did not send her away nor concur in the Apostles' counsel.
3. Although He declared that His ministry was PRIMARILY for the Jews ("Let the children first be fed . . ." Mk. 7:27a), He did not entirely shut the door to the Gentiles.

How, therefore, should Jesus' answer be interpreted? Two views of **dogs** are common:

1. By referring to Gentiles even as animals under the table, Jesus really intends to bring out the classic Jewish-Gentile prejudices without subscribing to them Himself. That is, whereas *kunàrion* is admittedly diminutive, still puppies are animals, not people. But because He said "puppies," not "dogs," He is seen as arguing good-naturedly with her about the usual mutual contempt between the two peoples.
2. The other view sees nothing of this partisan byplay. Rather, Jesus' exquisite choice of words flashes pictures all over the screen of her mind. In fact, even though this woman's little girl may not have owned a puppy (*kunàrion*), the lady herself was certainly familiar with house-dogs hopefully wagging their tails for a tidbit (*psichìon*) "accidentally" dropped by their little masters. Thus, Jesus' words intend only to picture a situation without any reference to traditional biases. In effect, they become a germ-parable that continues to insist upon a sense of fitness or appropriateness: "Children are fed in one way and time, while the puppies are fed differently and generally later. They are not permitted to act as if they too were children, however hungry they might be for even the meagerest morsel intended for their owners. The normal order is: first, the children are fed, and then the house-dogs. (Mk. 7:27) Nor is the children's food to be taken from them and given, instead, to the house-dogs. (Mt. 15:26) Neither of these possibilities would be proper (*kalòn*)."

If Jesus had no intention of helping her at all, there is no excusing Him for leading her on, opening up so many doors to hope. Only the long-faced, dull commentators fail to see the twinkle in Jesus' eyes or miss the kindness of His voice, and so can only quarrel about the bitterness and contemptuous arrogance of the word "dog." Had Jesus really said "dog" as the common versions generally render it, then the commentaries would have some reason to mention "dogs" as a derogatory term for foreigners and others of ill-repute. Although Arndt-Gingrich (458) say that *kunàrion* can also be used with no diminutive force at all, the only mention of *kunària* in the NT is in this text, whereas all references to "dogs" in the NT are only in Mt. 7:6; Lk. 16:21; Phil. 3:2; 2 Pt. 2:22; Rev. 22:15, and the word there is always *kùon*, never *kunàrion*. Jewish-Gentile prejudices do not even enter into Jesus' meaning, because His argument is against the

impropriety of taking what has been especially prepared (bread) for a particular people (Jews) and giving it, instead, to another group (Gentiles) for whom it was not immediately intended. The whole question revolves around the planning of the Master of the house (God), who ordained that the normal procedure should follow the proper order: (1) Children (Jews); (2) House pets (Gentiles). The decision about what is "good, fair or right (*kalòn*)" is decided by the Master of the house, not by hard feelings and prejudices between those who, in this figure, turn out to be the children and the dogs. (Study Ac. 3:26; 13:26, 46.)

**"Let the children first be fed"** (Mk. 7:27a) is a theme developed in the Roman epistle by Paul, who, though fundamentally determined to expound the universality of the salvation in Christ, cannot set aside this rigorous precedence: "The Gospel is the power of God to save anyone who believes it, to the Jew first and then to the Greek." (Ro. 1:16) For eight chapters Paul presents justification by faith as quite unconnected with any sacred pre-existing conditions such as possession of the Law or descent from the right nation through the patriarchs, etc. Immediately thereafter, however, in chapters 9-11 even he too deals with Israel's preciousness to God in the universal plan of salvation.

Whereas Jesus had presented to the lady an "either-or" dilemma, i.e. either children or puppies; or, at least, first children, then puppies, she briskly turns it into a "both-and" proposition, i.e. both children and puppies. Watch how she does this:

15:27 **But she said, Yea, Lord: For even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.**

C. Her RESILIANCE is shown by her steady good humor though she was desperate.

1. Her obvious humility admitted the truth of whatever name Jesus applied to her. Her quick-witted tact helped her to grasp her relationship with God's plans for Israel and act immediately to take advantage of what she now understood as her relationship. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 41) says so well:

Heathenism may be like the dogs, when compared with the children's place and privileges; but He is their Master still, and they are under His table; and when He breaks the bread, there is enough and to spare for them.

2. By finding her place in His mission to the Jews, she implicitly accepts the limitation of His personal mandate to that nation. Whereas Jesus had raised the objection that in a household the proper feeding order is first the children and then possibly the dogs (Mk. 7:27), never rightly reversed, she answered with the undoubted fact that, even before all the children's needs are met, the puppies are permitted a few crumbs CONTEMPORANEOUSLY with the feeding of the children. In this way she argues the rightness of her hope to be blessed even before Jesus completed His ministry to Israel. Therefore, she consents to God's limitations of His Messiah's mission to Israel. She has now learned what she needed to know.
3. She did not ask great things; only a *crumb* of His power. Whereas her request is of inestimable value to her, she pictures His bountiful power as so great that, by comparison, her request is really insignificant. This is genuine understanding of His power, because the common human impotence in the presence of demon-possession made anyone who could exorcize demons appear great, and yet she considers such a marvelous miracle as mere "crumbs" for Jesus.

This gallant woman acquiesced in everything He revealed, but persisted in finding her place in His plans. Because she kept bouncing back after each seeming rebuff, He was able to verify for all time the excellence of her faith, build her understanding, strengthen her faith, and, at the same time, justify His temporary stepping outside His strictly Hebrew role.

### III. THE REWARDING OF FAITH (15:28; Mk. 7:29f)

15:28 **Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it done unto thee even as thou wilt.** Mark (7:29) connects this response of Jesus directly with this indomitable woman's marvelously brilliant attitude: "He said to her, 'For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.'" Nothing conquers Jesus' heart faster than that faith that says, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him!" However, why should we think, with some, that Jesus allowed Himself to be worsted in argument, when He has been skillfully guiding her into this situation where she can rise in faith to this glorious conclusion? Plummer (*Matthew*, 217)

is right to say that

. . . He at once accepts her interpretation of the metaphor as proof of her insight and faith. With doglike perseverance she had excelled even the children in trust, and assuredly she might receive what the children would never miss.

**Great is thy faith:** by His treatment, Jesus had personally sounded the depth of this gallant woman's character, and His conclusion is well-founded:

1. Doubtless, her excellence of character had a great deal to do with the toughness of her faith. (See notes on 13:23.)
2. If her trust in Jesus at the beginning only thought of Him as a local Jewish Messiah, it has now grown to see all nations blessed by Israel's Christ, even if only as undeserving "dogs under the table." No one can rightly approach God without this fundamental understanding of his own need for grace.
3. Like the Gentile centurion, she also believed that Jesus could heal at a distance. (Cf. Notes on 8:5)
4. The Lord had thrown up barrier after barrier, yet she brilliantly hurdled them all with keen wit, steady resourcefulness and genuine humility and finally with real understanding of what Jesus taught about His mission.
5. Jesus' verdict is further vindicated by her instant obedience to His command to go home to find her daughter free from the demon.

Whether Jesus so intended it or not, this incident well illustrates the justice of His condemnation of Bethsaida, Chorazin and Capernaum. In fact, He had pointed out that, had those ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon enjoyed the opportunities for faith that the Galilean cities had known, the former would have long ago repented in deep humility. Whereas one example does not establish a rule, still she is genuinely typical of the joyous reception the Gospel later received among outcasts and pagans. (Cf. Ac. 8:4-8; 13:48; 16:34)

**Be it done unto thee even as thou wilt.** Note Jesus' total confidence in His own authority over demons not even present. Without prayers, without orders directed to the demons, without exorcism, by the simple exercise of His mighty will, the distant demon leaves the girl.

Did Jesus' acquiescence to the woman's wishes constitute a contradiction of His own objection in v. 24?

1. No, because to help this one woman as an exception would not

interfere with His fundamental ministry to the Jews. Because it is truly an exception to the rule, it demonstrates the reality of the rule.

2. No, because Jesus had helped Gentiles before. (Mt. 8:5-13) Even if the strict wording of His divine mandate had read: "Jews only," He knows that God "desires mercy and not sacrifice." (See notes on 9:13; 12:7.)
3. No, because she had not asked Him to forsake the Jews that He might dedicate Himself exclusively to the Gentiles. She had requested only a little help for one Gentile.
4. No, because her present understanding and faith may be seen as qualifying her to become a real daughter of Abraham, the larger target of Jesus' mission. (See on 15:25.)

**And her daughter was healed from that hour.** i.e. *healed* of every symptom and result of demon possession. With characteristic confidence in Jesus, the lady went directly home, certain of the truth of His affirmation. Mark (7:30) narrates how she "found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone." It is unnecessary to interpret the Greek phrase *bebleménon epì tèn klínen* as referring to the violence with which the demon left, for this is a regular idiom for "lying in a bed." (Study Mt. 9:2; 8:6, 14 in Greek. Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 130; article *bállo*.)

If there had been any doubt in the mind of the Jewish reader about the rightness of the Messiah's dealings with a Canaanite woman, Jesus' instantaneous liberation of the demonized daughter is supernatural proof of His right to bless any Gentile He chooses, even if they be descendants of the cursed Hamitic race.

Why not start a collection of stories illustrating the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" that show how gently He dealt with foreigners and outcasts, like this Phoenician lady, the Roman centurion, the schismatic Samaritans (Jn. 4:7ff, 30, 39ff), and the excommunicated Hebrew (Jn. 9:35-37) and others?

### LESSONS FOR APPLICATION

1. What this incident meant to race relations between Jews and Gentiles in the first century, it signifies for all race relations today too. If the severely limited Son of God can appreciate and bless this foreigner, a member of an accursed race, what of His followers

now freed from racial restrictions and specifically ordered to love and evangelize the whole world?

2. Jesus answered the believing request of this woman who was not even a member of the covenant people. Beware of believing that God must answer only the prayers of "our people," if He finds great faith outside the New Israel!
3. During His earthly ministry, Jesus chose to be guided by the methodological principle of His own Jewish Messiahship. This placed relative limits on what He could accomplish in terms of Gentile evangelization and blessing. Today, He has established spiritual guidelines by which He judges and blesses. Only those who align themselves with His plans, qualify themselves by faith, may hope to receive His bounty. He longs to bless men, but their dams of lack of faith and hope in His mercy hold back His generosity. If He chooses to distribute His gifts according to rules which He chooses not to disobey, who can complain? He is Lord. If man is disappointed with God's choices and wisdom, it is man's fault, not God's. This text, however, encourages us to bring our wants to Christ, however unworthy or unqualified we might be, but with a faith that lets God be God and lets His rules stand.
4. Morgan (*Matthew*, 203) exhorts: "In our relation to Jesus Christ as His messengers and workers, let us look for faith in unexpected places. Let us not keep out of Tyre and Sidon because there are no good people there. There is a freshness of faith everywhere waiting to surprise us if we will only venture to cross the line."
5. If God be determined to bless us, nothing can prevent us from receiving the answers to our prayers but our own unbelief, misunderstanding or ignorance of God's plans.
6. God's silence must never be interpreted as indicating His willingness to answer our prayers. Even while He is silent, He may be working out the very answer we seek. His silence may indicate His desire that we learn the discipline of patient prayer and humble waiting. God answers our prayers, however perhaps not according to the time schedules we try to impose upon Him. (Cf. Lk. 18:1-8)
7. Nor should we be discouraged from continuing our prayers merely because of a lack of sympathy in the attitude of Jesus' disciples.
8. Not even the difficult or unclear messages from the Lord should deter us from seeking His blessing and remaining His trusting followers. There may be Bible texts and commands that seem to contradict reason or common sense, but they are revelations of what is otherwise unknowable and must be grasped by trusting

God to be telling us the truth.

9. Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 136): "So many people . . . pray really because they do not wish to miss a chance. They do not really believe in prayer; they have only the feeling that something might just possibly happen, and they do not wish to miss a chance. This woman came because Jesus was not just a possible helper; He was her only hope."
10. *PHC* (Vol. XXIII, 266): "We too are living under certain definite laws of God; and if we transgress them, then under all ordinary circumstances we must expect the consequences, and we make a grievous mistake in appealing lightly to the mercy of God. Doubtless His mercy is infinite; but so are His truth and justice, and His determination to uphold the laws He has laid down. Our Lord longed to help the woman, but it was hard for Him to infringe the rule which He had laid down for His own guidance."
11. *PHC* (Vol. XXIII, 268) commenting on Mk. 7:28, notices: "This verse contains three important principles for our guidance in the spiritual life. 1. Agree with the Lord, no matter what He says. "Yes, Lord." 2. Think of another truth, and urge it with Him as a plea. "Yet." [i.e. open your eyes to other alternatives or other facets of His will.] 3. Whatever happens, have faith in the Lord, and possess thy soul in patience. His dealings may be unscrutable, but the foundation of them all is love."
12. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 42): "To how many, not only of all nations and conditions, but in all states of heart and mind, nay in the very lowest depths of conscious guilt and alienation from God, must this have brought unspeakable comfort . . . Be it so, an outcast, 'dog,' not at the table, but under the table. Still we are at His feet; it is our Master's Table; He is our Master; and He breaks the children's bread, it is of necessity that 'the children's crumbs,' fall to us—enough, quite enough and to spare. Never can we be outside His reach, nor of that of His gracious care, and of sufficient provision to eternal life."
13. Edersheim (*ibid.*): "Yet this lesson also must we learn, that as 'heathens' we may not call on Him as 'David's Son,' till we know why we so call Him. If there can be no despair, no being cast out by Him, no absolute distance that hopelessly separates from His Person and Provision, there must be no presumption, no forgetfulness of the right relation, no expectancy of magic-miracles, no viewing of Christ as a Jewish Messiah. [i.e. as a



Hebrew superman, a political hero.] We must learn it, and painfully . . . that . . . what we are and where we are, that we may be prepared for the grace of God and the gift of grace. All men—Jews and Gentiles, 'children' and 'dogs' are as before Christ and God equally undeserving and equally sinners, but those who have fallen deep can only learn that they are sinners by learning that they are great sinners and will only taste of the children's bread when they have felt [their need]."

14. Galilee's loss, when Jesus left, is the Gentile woman's gain. (Cfr. Ro. 11:11f) We must take warning from His departure from His own who rejected Him because, although they had almost been moved to yield allegiance to Him, they would not. So He finally abandoned them to their own worst enemy, their own unrealizable personal and national dreams. He can abandon us too, to our own miserable self! (Cf. Ro. 11:17, 24)

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. From where had Jesus come when he entered the foreign territory mentioned in this section?
2. Locate geographically the foreign territory where this event occurs.
3. Summarize the travel plan Jesus followed from the debate about traditions until the demand for a sign from heaven. (Mt. 16)
4. What was the stated purpose for this trip? How does this purpose harmonize with the events immediately preceding the trip?
5. List several reasons why Jesus must abide by His original mission to earth by refusing to begin a ministry among the Gentiles.
6. List the various factors that increased the discouragements which the Syrophenician woman must overcome.
7. List the various factors that make the woman's faith "great."
8. Explain Jesus' figure of speech about the dogs under the table.
9. What additional statement does Mark record that might indicate Jesus' willingness to help the woman?
10. How did the woman turn Jesus' figure of speech to her credit, indicating that what she requested was still possible within the express limits of His personal mission?
11. In what condition did the woman find her daughter when she returned home?
12. What evidence is there in this section of Jesus' supernatural identity?