



Part 5: Did Jesus Call a Woman a Dog?

Matthew 15:21-28

God calls us to a great faith that hopes in and holds on to Jesus.

Matthew 15:21-28 is a difficult and challenging passage. It appears that Jesus might have called a woman a dog. It feels rude, offensive, potentially chauvinistic or even racist.

Did Jesus call a woman a dog?

- Some try to explain the harshness of these words that in the Greek, the word for dog is in the diminutive form which implies a small dog. So, Jesus is really saying she is a cute little dog...it is not as bad of an insult. But recent scholarship says the diminutive form in the first century does not always mean little dog. It is more likely that Jesus is using the term in a Jewish sense which is an insult as an unclean dirty dogy.
- Jesus is using a reversal of expectations to test and draw out the woman's great faith and contrast the disciples' little faith (4x). Jesus flips things inside out and upside down, he breaks down expectations and barriers revealing the greater kingdom reality...and it all hinges on Jesus first response, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 15:24)
- Tyre and Sidon – north of Israel, current Lebanon
 - This passage starts out in the Greek "And behold, and look". It is setting up a striking contrast to Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees and teachers of the law in the previous passage to Jesus' interaction with a Canaanite woman. The pharisees should of know the way and heart of God, and yet their hearts are far from God. Canaanites are considered enemies of Israel. Josephus the 1st Century Jewish historian, described Tyrians as Jew's bitterest enemies, they always made war against the Jews. Tyre was powerful, pagan, and immoral and would use its economic domination to buy food out of Jewish mouths, even their bread. There was much animosity and tension between Tyre and the Jews.
 - This Canaanite woman was a hurting and desperate mom who would do anything for her daughter. She cries out, "Lord, son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-

possessed and suffering terribly.” We don’t know her backstory, but she knows about Jesus, maybe she has heard his teaching, or even seen him do a miracle. We know in Mark 4 there were some from Tyre that came to hear his teaching and be healed. The expression, “Son of David” is calling Jesus the Messiah, the expected anointed one, and the hope for the world.

- At first Jesus does not say anything, just waits. And we see she keeps crying out to a point where the disciples are annoyed of her and urge him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” Most likely the disciples look down upon her as an unclean gentile woman and don’t really care about her cries for mercy.
- Jesus’ response, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” And “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” The word “children” is most likely referring to the Jews and “bread” speaks of kingdom blessing and “dogs” are unclean Gentiles.
- This is rude, offensive, potentially chauvinistic or even racist. Not what you expect from Jesus, the friend of sinners.
- Jesus is testing the woman’s faith by mimicking what the disciples and most Jews would think and believe, that the Messiah is only for the Jews. He knows the hearts of the disciples and can hear their thoughts, and they even say, “send her away”. He is addressing their animosity to the Tyrians, their potentially deep-rooted prejudice against Gentiles.
- Jesus is addressing a significant barrier in their hearts towards his expanding mission to the Gentiles. Yes, Jesus first came to the Jews, but he is the Jewish messiah who offers salvation for all.

Expanding Gentile Mission [Chart]

- Over 15 times in Matthew, Gentiles are depicted as part of salvation history: Matthew 1:5-6; 2:1-12; 4:14-16,25; 8:10-12, 28-34; 10:18; 12:21,42; 13:38; 15:21-28; 24:14; 26:13; 27:32; 28:19-20
- Rahab (Canaanite) and Ruth (Moabite) – Matthew 1:5-6, Rahab was the first recorded Canaanite who followed Yahweh, God of the Israelites...a part of the genealogy of Jesus.
- Magi – Matthew 2:1-12, Wise men, astrologers, possibly sorcerers from the east.
- Roman Centurion (Cornelius) - Matthew 8:10-12 – paralyzed servant – great faith
- Hope for the Nations – Matthew 12:21, Fulfillment of the Isaiah 42 prophecy, “In his name the nations will put their hope.”
- Leads to The Great Commission – Matthew 28:18-20 – Make disciples of all nations.
- Continuation from the Old Testament – Abrahamic Covenant, Genesis 12, Psalm 87:3-4
- Psalm 87:3-4, “Glorious things are said of you, city of God: “I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me – Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush – and will say, “this one was born in Zion.”

Did Jesus call a woman a dog?

- No, Jesus is drawing out this woman’s great faith to expand his mission to all in contrast to the deep-rooted prejudice the disciples against the Gentiles.
- Matthew 15:23-28: The woman’s response to Jesus is brilliant. One commentator says this is the only time someone best Jesus in a debate...and it is a Canaanite woman. Matthew 15:27, “Yes, it is Lord,” she said, “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Jesus words feel insulting and shameful and yet she believes that Jesus has enough power and authority to heal her daughter even with the leftovers. She has great faith in Jesus.

Little Faith vs. Great Faith

Little Faith

- Gets annoyed by the interruptions of others
- Hopes in Jesus just for themselves
- Holds on to grudges and deep-rooted prejudice

Great Faith

- Cries out to Jesus
 - True test of faith is what or who we first turn to. The Canaanite woman turned to Jesus for help and cries out to him. Do we first look to Jesus and cry out in times of crisis, or rather do we turn to our own ability, connections, or resources?
- Hopes in Jesus
 - The Canaanite woman heard something or saw something that gave her hope that Jesus is good, has all authority and power, and can heal her daughter. Do we believe that Jesus is good, has all authority and power? Do we believe this even when Jesus does not feel good and whatever you are going through does not make sense.
- Holds on to Jesus
 - The Canaanite woman is persistent as she holds on to hope in Jesus. She holds on even to the annoyance of the disciples. She holds on even when Jesus ignored her. She holds on even when Jesus appears to reject her. She holds on even when Jesus appears to insult and shame her. Faith is deep trust, like holding on, clinging to Jesus no matter what. How well do we persistently hold on to Jesus when he appears to be silent, rejects us, or even appears to offend us?

“Faith is the gaze of the soul on a saving God.” – A.W. Tozer

“Faith is not the boast of the strong. It is the cry of the weak in need of a Savior.” – John Piper

Great Faith – Nepal/Pakistan trip example

Discussion Questions:

- Read Matthew 15:21-28 over again and share your previous impressions of this text. Did you find this passage rude and offensive? What do you think of the interpretation that Jesus is testing and drawing out the Canaanite woman’s faith while contrasting the deep rooted prejudice of the disciples?
- In the battle between little faith and great faith, do you ever struggle with little faith? What does little faith look like for you in your life?
- If great faith as seen in the Canaanite woman is crying out to Jesus, hoping in Jesus, and holding on to Jesus, how have you seen great faith in your life? Is there any area you need to grow in faith?
- If faith is primarily a deep trust like holding on to Jesus, is there anything in your life currently where you need to hold to Jesus?