

“The Possessed Girl”

Have you ever walked into the middle of a conversation that is going on – and have been taken aback by what you see and hear – you see someone’s reaction, and it seems over the top? That’s what we have this morning as we jump into the middle of what’s been going on – with our text from St. Matthew 15.

As you listened to this text, what grabbed your attention? Did you focus in on Jesus and His seemingly harsh and unloving treatment of the Canaanite woman? At the very least – it is that part of the text that makes us a bit uncomfortable.

What may be overlooked is this poor, poor, possessed girl. There she is, right in the center of the text! The “poor, poor possessed girl” that I’m talking about is not the daughter – but THE MOTHER – this Canaanite woman who is POSSESSED BY FAITH in Jesus. She is consumed by the belief that Jesus is gracious, merciful, able to heal her daughter – that He is their Savior.

So that we don’t just step into the middle of the conversation, and are unnecessarily caught off guard – let’s take a look at the context in which this encounter of Jesus and the Canaanite woman takes place.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has been sparing with the religious leaders (the Pharisees and the scribes). They have come from Jerusalem and have charged Jesus and His disciples with breaking from “the traditions of the elders.”

Because Jesus and His disciples do not follow the tradition of ritual hand washing before they eat – the religious leaders consider them to be ceremonially unclean – therefore, they are cut off from God.

Jesus rebukes their hypocrisy. “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” “Hear and understand,” He says, “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth ...” And also He says, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.”

Then Matthew tells us that “Jesus went away from there” – from Israel, and from the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem – “and [He] withdrew to district of Tyre and Sidon. Now Tyre and Sidon are definitely not Israel! Notice what Jesus has done – He withdraws from Israel and goes into the midst of the pagans.

“And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying ...” Now, before we get to what comes out of her mouth – some might say that this conversation should never even have gotten started. Not only is she a Gentile, but also a Canaanite, a member of the ancient and idolatrous enemies of God’s people.

It would be so easy to write her off as one who is defiled, ceremonially unclean, cut off from God – but do you hear what comes from her mouth? “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.”

She calls Him “Lord” – not just in the sense of “sir, or master” – but “Lord, Son of David.” This woman is “possessed” (if you will) by the belief that this man standing before her is the Lord of heaven and earth. She believes that the one true God is merciful. It’s no wonder her faith cries out on behalf of her daughter who is “severely oppressed by a demon.”

“But He did not answer her a word.” I know, that doesn’t seem right, but hold on. His own disciples come and beg Him to send her away. It seems like they didn’t learn anything from the Feeding of the 5,000 when they wanted Jesus to send the crowds away. They’re always trying to send people away from Jesus.

However, it is Jesus’ answer that troubles us. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” He says. Indeed, Jesus is the “sent one.” God the Father has sent Him into the world for the salvation of all people. Yes, the Father sent His Son TO Israel – but also THROUGH Israel for all.

When Jesus speaks of the “lost sheep” – I can’t help but think of Him as the Good Shepherd searching for the lost sheep. Could one have wandered so far from Jerusalem, from Israel?

The irony is that the ones who have come from Jerusalem – the Pharisees and the scribes – are the ones who have wandered away from God’s Word, from the true worship of God, from God Himself. Now here, in the midst of the pagans, Jesus finds one who bends the knee and worships Him.

“But she came and knelt before Him, saying, “Lord, help me.” Notice how genuine faith possesses her – she knows where her help comes from – her faith is not deterred by what SEEMS to be Jesus’ lack of compassion for her and her daughter.

“And He answered, “It is NOT GOOD [LXX Gen. 2:18] to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” I know, the translation on your insert has Jesus saying that it is “not right” – but “not good” is the better translation. Again, Jesus seems harsh with His words – but this isn’t a matter of “right” vs. wrong – it’s a matter of GOOD order – Israel first, and then, through Israel to ALL.

Back away from the text for a minute and consider the actual words that come from Jesus’ mouth. You would agree that it is not good to take your children’s food and give it to the dogs. But Jesus is talking about the children of Israel and this woman – and notice – she agrees with Him!

“Yes,” she confesses – I am a dog – I am not Israel – nor am I deserving, worthy that you should give me the time of day – much less hear and answer my prayer to have mercy on my daughter. But you are the “Lord” – you are the “Son of David” – the Savior, not just of Israelites, but the whole world. You are merciful, gracious – and you are able to answer my prayer!

“Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Be merciful Jesus. Even your crumbs are enough. If you can feed over 5,000 from 5 loaves – your crumbs are more than enough for my daughter. Please Lord, Master, “have mercy.”

This woman’s faith humbles me – repents me, for my little faith, my lack of faith. She is possessed by the Holy Spirit who leads her to cling to Jesus Christ for all He’s worth. She has been enlightened to know the Christ – His grace and mercy – and to hunger and thirst for His gifts.

In humble, repentant faith, we kneel before the Lord today, begging – “have mercy on us.” Dearly beloved, your “Lord” and “Master” is sent to you – not with crumbs – but with the feast of victory, the feast of your salvation.

His Body and Blood casts out your unbelief and strengthens your little faith. This is “for you,” He promises – for the forgiveness of all your sin – and where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.

How great is the faith that lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord – our merciful, gracious, healing and saving Lord. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.