

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew  
 SERMON: **Shocking Words from the Lips of Jesus**  
 SCRIPTURE: Matthew 15:21-28  
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus  
 DATE: March 2, 2008

I doubt if anyone will argue with my sermon title this morning after we read our Scripture text from Matthew 15:21-28:

*Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."*

*Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."*

*He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."*

*The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.*

*He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."*

*"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*

*Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.*

It was not unusual for Jesus to show contempt, even anger, toward certain people; for example, the religious leaders who opposed Him. He called them hypocrites, blind guides, snakes and whitewashed tombs. His anger toward them was not so much because of their animosity and hatred toward Him personally as because they hindered others from coming to Him. He also showed anger toward the merchandisers who filled the temple with their money-changing schemes. Twice He cleansed the temple of them—once near the beginning of His ministry and again during Passion Week.

But the account before us this morning is probably unique in the harshness He seems to demonstrate toward one who sincerely and humbly comes to Him for help. His attitude is downright shocking at first, but once understood it reveals some of Jesus' greatest characteristics, particularly His wisdom, compassion, and love.

### **Background of a most unusual miracle story**

Our text today opens up with these words, "Leaving that place (presumably Galilee), Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon." Tyre and Sidon were already ancient cities on the coast of the Mediterranean in what was then known as Phoenicia (Lebanon today). They are still thriving cities.

Several factors caused Jesus to leave Israel on this rather lengthy walk of about 50 miles. One is the mounting pressure from the religious leaders, especially after He offended and embarrassed the ecclesiastical heavyweights from Jerusalem, and Jesus wants to avoid any premature showdown with them. He is ready and willing to go to the Cross at the time appointed by the Father, but He will not allow His enemies to set the timetable.

A second factor in His leaving the region is that the people are flocking to Him for the wrong reasons. They are right in recognizing that His miraculous power marked Him as the Messiah, but they are wrong about the kind of Messiah He has come to be. John 6:15 indicates that after the feeding of the 5,000 “they intended to come and make him king by force;” therefore He withdrew.

Perhaps even more germane is the fact that He and His disciples need some rest. You will recall that was the reason they had gone across the Sea of Galilee toward Bethsaida some weeks before, but the crowds had spotted them and followed on foot, and He ended up multiplying the loaves and the fishes in a miraculous feeding of the multitudes. There was the storm that night, during which Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee and rescued the disciples. And immediately after reaching the shore near Capernaum people brought all their sick to him and begged him to just let them touch the hem of His garment. No rest yet.

Then the bigwigs from Jerusalem showed up (15:1-20), and Jesus used that as a teachable moment to let both the crowds and the disciples know that moral and spiritual defilement has nothing to do with hand washing—it comes from the heart. Finally, Jesus decides to take the disciples and actually leave the country, heading northeast out of Israel to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Mark tells us “he entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret” (Mark 7:24). You thought the paparazzi were a modern phenomenon, but apparently not. Jesus can’t find rest even in a foreign country!<sup>i</sup>

Now among those who heard about Jesus’ presence in the region of Tyre and Sidon was a certain Canaanite woman.

### **A Canaanite woman seeks Jesus’ healing for her daughter. (Matthew 15:21-22)**

This woman is called a Canaanite by Matthew, but that apparently refers only to the culture in which she lived. Mark tells us she was actually a Greek woman who was born in Syrian Phoenicia (Mark 7:26). The most likely facts are that she was Greek by race, Phoenician by country, and Canaanite by culture.

**She reveals a certain knowledge of who Jesus is.** The woman comes to where Jesus is and cries out, “Lord, Son of David.” It’s difficult, if not impossible to discern from this exactly what the woman understands of Jesus’ person and nature, but she certainly recognizes that He is no ordinary person. “Lord” was used of any man who commanded a great deal of respect, but “Son of David” demonstrates that she believes Him to be a descendant of the great King David. More than that, the term, “Lord, Son of David,” was a recognized name for the coming Jewish Messiah. Although she probably does not understand the full meaning of His lordship or messiahship, she comes with a sense of awe and wonder at His power and goodness.

**She asks for His mercy on her.** “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!” People don’t ask for mercy unless they have lost all hope and can do nothing about their situation themselves. This woman knows that Jesus is her only hope.

I want us to take a few moments this morning to talk about the doctrine of mercy. Mercy is generally seen as a twin alongside grace, because they often appear together in the Scriptures, with grace always mentioned first. Thus mercy seems to live in grace's shadow, eclipsed by her popularity and prestige. How many churches do you know that have grace in their name—Grace Baptist, Grace Presbyterian, Grace Methodist, Grace Evangelical Free. But how many churches do you know that have Mercy in their name? I don't know any. "Mercy" seems to be reserved for hospitals, care homes, and rescue missions.

So what's the difference between grace and mercy? Grace speaks of God's goodness toward those who deserve only punishment. The focus is on the sin in our lives. Mercy speaks of God's goodness toward those in misery and distress. The focus is toward our pitiful condition. According to Ephesians 2:4 God is "rich in mercy." He's loaded with it! He is infinitely compassionate toward the miserable. Paul, after admitting that he was "formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor," was allowed to become a follower of the Way and a participant in the service of the King? How and why? He says, "I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief."

In the OT the term for mercy is *Chesed*. It is frequently translated "lovingkindness" or "loyal love." If you examine all the uses of *chesed* you discover at least five different human conditions to which God's mercy is applied:

- 1. When suffering the pain of unfair and unjust consequences.** Genesis 39:21-23 informs us that Joseph, dumped in a dungeon because of a false accusation, experienced God's *chesed*, His mercy. It relieved him of bitterness.
- 2. When we're enduring the grief of a death.** Ruth 1:8-9 offers the comforting words of Naomi to her grieving daughters-in-law shortly after the premature deaths of their husbands. She asks the Lord to grant them *chesed*. You see, God not only gives "dying grace;" He also provides "grieving mercy," which relieves us of anger as we try to process the loss of a loved one.
- 3. When we're struggling with the limitations of a handicap.** 2 Samuel 9 is the account of how David extended *chesed* to a crippled relative named Mephibosheth and allowed him a place at his table for the rest of his days. Mercy relieves us of the self-pity that often accompanies a handicap.
- 4. When we are in physical pain.** Job 10:12 speaks of the Lord giving *chesed* to Job, enabling him to survive during his days of intense pain. Mercy removes the hopelessness that would otherwise overwhelm us in times of great affliction.
- 5. When we're under a cloud of guilt.** Psalm 32:10 and 51:1 both speak of David's gratitude for God's *chesed* after his affair with Bathsheba. Mercy relieves the misery of guilt—the lingering sting of wrongdoing.<sup>ii</sup>

To recap, there is no unfair consequence too extreme for mercy, no grief too deep, no handicap too debilitating, no pain too excruciating, no sin too shameful. As the hymn puts it, “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea.”

Now am I suggesting that this Syro-Phoenician woman understood all of this theology of mercy when she asked Jesus to have mercy on her? No, of course not. But she did understand how desperate her own situation was and she clearly saw Jesus as her only hope. She also apparently understood that mercy, like grace, is always undeserved. She does not come to Him demanding that He do something for her; rather she comes pleading.

**She begs for His help.** The woman cries out, “My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.” We do not know what exact symptoms the daughter was experiencing, but we learn from other passages that demon possession could cause a person to be blind, mute, violent, suicidal, and to experience any number of other serious maladies. But we do know the extent to which the girl is afflicted by demons, for the mother uses a term which means “cruelly or wickedly or terribly possessed.” This is no minor case of depression or anxiety.

Perhaps you have noticed that Matthew doesn’t record any specific request from the woman that Jesus heal her daughter, but that is obviously implied. Mark, however, in his account of the same incident clearly states that “she begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter” (Mark 7:26).

Now so far this story is not particularly unique. There were many who came to Jesus and begged for His mercy and healing power in their lives—scores already in the book of Matthew. But it is at this point the account goes in a totally unexpected direction.

### **Jesus tests her by erecting a series of barriers. (15:23-26)**

John MacArthur writes,

*Some people have to struggle against strong doubts before they come to fully trust Christ for salvation. Others have to struggle against the objections and arguments of friends and family. Still others struggle to believe because they have never heard the gospel clearly presented or because they see inconsistencies in the lives of Christians they know. This woman, however, had barriers place in her way by the Savior Himself.<sup>iii</sup>*

**At first He ignores her.** Matthew tells us in verse 23 that “Jesus did not answer a word.” This seems so uncharacteristic of Jesus. He who was generally so responsive to the needy around Him, who picked up little children and talked to them, who engaged strangers like Zaccheus who seemed to be lost in a crowd, nevertheless ignores this woman entirely. You know something, sometimes the hardest response to receive is no response at all. I’m a person who loves a good argument or a good debate. What bothers me most is when someone clams up and refuses to engage at all. Over the years there have been those who quit the church without saying anything about the reasons, and when you try to contact them, they don’t respond. What

are you supposed to do with *that*? I think most of us would rather be told “get lost” than to be ignored.

Well, Jesus’ silence seems to embolden His disciples to respond in a harsh way toward the woman. They come to Jesus and urge Him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” The woman is an irritant, nothing but a nuisance. She is driving them crazy. She is drawing unwanted attention.

The disciples apparently don’t realize that Jesus does nothing unloving and nothing without a divine purpose. He is testing the woman’s faith. He is putting up barriers, not to drive her away, but to draw her close. I think He is undoubtedly also using the occasion to show His disciples the value of persistent faith. He wants them to see the difference between the genuine and the superficial.

But their suggestion to send the woman away elicits an even stranger response from Jesus, as He erects a second barrier.

**Then He declines to help her because she’s not Jewish.** Verse 24: “He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.’” I’m not sure how the disciples understand this comment, but I think it would be wise for us to examine the text very closely. There is a “but” at the beginning of verse 24 in the original Greek (and also in the NASB) that for some reason was left out of the NIV. It seems to set Jesus over against the disciples. One possible explanation is that the disciples are actually hinting in verse 23 that Jesus should grant the woman’s request so she will go away. His response, then, would be interpreted as, “But how could I do this when my mission is to Israel?”

On the surface Jesus’ statement is confusing to us. There is no doubt that Jesus’ primary earthly ministry was to the Jewish people. After all, He never went to Rome or Athens or Alexandria or any other major Gentile city. Apart from very occasional trips like this one he spent all of his time in Galilee and Judea. Yet it is obvious that “God so loved *the world* that He gave His one and only Son” (John 3:16). It is also clear that Jesus “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of *the whole world*.” So Jesus did have a mission beyond Israel.

There are mysteries here which are not easy to solve, but I would say that Jesus is emphasizing that His earthly mission was to the lost of Israel. The wider mission to the world would be the task of His disciples once they were indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit. I suspect what He says is confusing to His disciples as well, for they have seen Him reach out to Gentiles and Samaritans before. After all, He willingly healed the servant of the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13). He also offered the water of life to the Samaritan woman at Sychar (John 4). But now He refuses to help this woman simply because she is not of the house of Israel?!

Whatever effect Jesus’ response has on the disciples, it must have been a painful blow to the

woman. Once again there is a “but” in the original at the beginning of verse 25 that has again been left out of the NIV. It reads literally, “But the woman came and knelt before him. ‘Lord, help me!’ she said.” Despite the barrier He has raised, despite the fact that His mission is to lost Israelites and she is a Canaanite, she doesn’t react with bitterness or resentment because she still knows that He is her only hope. She can think of only one thing—freeing her little girl from demonic torture. So she comes to Him and kneels down (the word literally means she prostrates herself on the ground) and begs Him for help. Her posture is one of abject humility, if not worship.

Amazingly still a third time Jesus puts up a barrier. In fact, He speaks what are perhaps the most shocking words ever to cross His lips: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

**Most shockingly He compares her to a household dog.** The terms “children” and “dogs” were commonly used by the Jews to refer, respectively, to themselves and to Gentiles. The woman has undoubtedly heard racial insults like this many times before in her dealings with Jewish people. But why in the world would the gentle Jesus speak this way? What is *this* all about?

Some scholars have urged us not to interpret this incident more negatively than is necessary. William Barclay reminds us that “The tone and the look with which a thing is said make all the difference.”<sup>iv</sup> In other words Jesus may have spoken these words with a smile on His face, or at least a look of compassion, rather than in a nasty, surly manner. Others remind us that there are two different Greek words used in the NT for dogs. One refers to the mangy mongrels that roamed in packs and fed off the garbage. The dogs referred to here, however, are household pets, sometimes treated almost as family.

O.K. I understand why they are trying to soften the blow here, trying to salvage Jesus’ reputation. But I don’t think there’s any way to interpret this so that it sounded pleasant to the woman. Everyone of us who has a dog, no matter how much that dog is loved, knows the difference between the dog and our children. We would never take food needed by our children and give it to the dog. At best the dog sits under the table, not at the table. The woman gets the message that as a Gentile she has no place at the table, no guaranteed rights. Jesus certainly is erecting an additional barrier to her faith.

But amazingly she is once again undaunted.

**The woman demonstrates incredible persistence. (15:22-27)**

**She refuses to take “no” for an answer.** How many of us would put up with this kind of apparent abuse? I can just hear some of us saying, “So much for your message of love and compassion, your narrow, bigoted faith. I want nothing to do with a God or a Messiah or a religion like that.” But the woman rejects such responses. She will not go away. Her love for her daughter is so great that she will not let go of the only hope she has.

**She boldly asks for just the “leftovers” of Jesus’ great power.** In an incredible flash of insight she picks up on Jesus’ own illustration. “‘Yes, Lord,’ she said, ‘but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’” She’s not asking to be treated as an equal; she has no hope of that. She’s not asking anything for herself. She wants just one thing, and she believes it amounts to no more than crumbs considering the amazing power Jesus has been demonstrating in His healing of so many. *Please heal my daughter!*

If this story raises any doubts about Jesus’ character due to his behavior toward this woman, and it probably does for many, those doubts are now hopefully removed.

**Jesus affirms her great faith and grants her request immediately. (15:28)**

Verse 28: “‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.” There are only two individuals in the NT whom Jesus publicly praised for their great faith. Both were Gentiles. Many times He chided the Jewish people for their lack of faith. He even said to His own disciples, “You of little faith!” (14:31), and again in next week’s passage, 16:8.

But to the Roman Centurion and the Syro-Phoenician woman he said, “You have great faith.” Her faith wasn’t great just because of her persistence or her humility. It was great because it was based on so little light and so few privileges. The woman had been raised in a pagan culture renowned for its wickedness. She had no heritage of God’s Word or God’s blessing. She had no access to His temple or the priesthood or the sacrifices. Yet she believed!

This woman lived out the truth that permeates Scripture and is verbalized so beautifully in Jeremiah 29:11-14:

*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD.*

Like Jacob when wrestling with the Lord (Genesis 32:26), the woman would not let go until He blessed her. She kept asking until she received, kept seeking until she found, and kept knocking until it was opened to her (Matthew 7:7).

I want to play a video of this brief passage of Scripture here at the end of my message today. See if you don’t think the pathos of the moment has been captured beautifully. The text is word-for-word from the NIV. Show *Matthew, The Visual Bible*.

**Conclusion:** Charles Spurgeon said of this unique account, “The Lord of glory surrendered to the faith of the woman.” Of course, Jesus knew she would pass the test, as God knew Job would pass the test He put him through. So what may at first seem cruel on the surface in both accounts is actually compassionate and wise and loving. God is using these tests not to destroy His

servants but to validate and affirm their deep and abiding faith.

Let me close with a question: Are you undergoing some test in your own life that has caused you to wonder if God is ignoring you, if His grace and mercy are just for others, or worse yet, if He cares no more for you than if you were a household pet. If you're going through such a test right now, I challenge you to take this amazing account of the Syro-Phoenician woman to heart and trust God with your own situation. He may or may not choose to heal you or your loved one. Even in NT times only a fraction of the people who were sick found healing. He may not resolve the trial in the way you would like or as soon as you would like. But He will respond to persistent faith. He will grant encouragement and peace. He will show Himself to be God.

And if you have never surrendered your heart to Jesus, I urge you to pray the simple prayer this woman prayed, "Lord, have mercy on me." "Lord, help me!" He will. His mercy is wide enough for everyone, including you!

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i. Gentiles seem generally to have been more receptive to Jesus than the Jewish crowds. The Jews flocked to see miracles, and they certainly had Messianic fervor, but as already noted, their concept of the Messiah was warped and they thought the Messiah belonged exclusively to them. On the other hand, the Gentiles who lived in and around Israel were more open to hearing the truth from Jesus. Their pagan religious systems had failed them. They were poor, empty, and needy.

There's a curious parallel in the Palestinian territories today. The Evangelical press tends to be very pro-Israel and anti-Palestinian, but the fact of the matter is there are far more Palestinians who recognize Jesus as the Messiah than there are Jews. At least part of the reason for the disparity is that Israelis are generally wealthy by comparison, secure, and self-sufficient, while Palestinians are poor, neglected and have lost faith in their own leaders. Many turn to Jesus because there's no other place for them to turn.

ii. These five items were shared in a church newsletter on "Divine Relief" by Chuck Swindoll, undated.

iii. John MacArthur, *Matthew 8-15*, 471.

iv. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 134.