

Grace, Truth and Power **Matt. 15:21-38**

Intro. In the earlier verses of **chap. 15** we see the mentality and heart attitude of the Israel's religious leaders. They had a version of righteousness based on elaborate ceremonies like hand-washing. But no religious ceremony can cleanse from sin. Their calloused hearts were unmoved by the miracles Jesus performed in fulfillment of their own Scriptures. In their blindness, they even accused Jesus of doing those miracles in the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. – **Matt. 12:24**

At this time in His three year ministry, Jesus had turned from public teaching to teaching His disciples in private. Through the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, Jesus taught them the method of ministry. It was mission impossible for the disciples to feed that many people. But when they placed the little they had in Jesus' hands, He multiplied their meager supply to feed the crowd with 12 baskets of leftovers. This is how we serve Him today. When we commit to Jesus our time, energies, talents and resources ...He multiplies and blesses them to do things we could never do. But this big lesson wasn't learned the first time and had to be revisited. **vs. 21-39** report events that took place in two different locations where the grace, truth and power of the Lord Jesus were displayed. Jesus was again teaching His disciples about the wideness of God's mercy...mercy that reaches beyond Israel to include everyone.

1. Mercy for a Syrophenician woman – vs. 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.

As this new section opens in **v.21**, Jesus and His disciples traveled from Galilee to **Tyre and Sidon** about 40 miles north of Galilee. Today these coastal cities are part of modern Lebanon. Because the Jews avoided Gentile territory, it's surprising to find Jesus there. In fact, the OT has very little good to say about the city of Tyre and its inhabitants. Jesus didn't withdraw from Galilee out of fear, but as a matter of timing. His life and ministry was on a timetable established by God the Father. Each step of His itinerary had meaning that fulfilled the Father's purpose for Him.

There's a connection between this section and the hand-washing of **chap.15**. The Jews believed they should abstain from certain foods and avoid certain people. They believed it was soul-defiling to eat bread with unwashed hands. Even more defiling was contact with a Gentile. They felt Gentiles were beyond salvation...unsavable! But which way had Jesus led His disciples? And who was waiting for them when they got there? Gentiles! This was the first and only time Jesus ventured outside the borders of Israel. It was the beginning of a walking tour through Gentile territory that may have lasted as long as 6 months. But why did Jesus go there and why now? Here's the connection. The teaching Jesus gave by way of His confrontation by the Pharisees, needed reinforcement. So the next two events were the sequel or the lab phase of the teaching given in **vs.1-20**. They constitute a preview of Gospel power that would eventually progress beyond the borders of Israel to the whole world. The disciples needed to understand that God's mercy is wide enough to reach and save those who are far away (Gentiles) as well as those who are near. (Jews) They needed to know more about changed hearts versus washed hands. Why was this necessary?

... because the attitudes and biases of the disciples were not much different from those of the Pharisees. This touch not, taste not, handle not brand of spirituality was engrained in them. They hadn't yet grasped the wonder of God's grace or realize the Gospel transcends every racial, social and geographical barrier. Christ's coming was Good News for all people, but they still limited it to the Jews. So this excursion into Gentile territory served as preparation for the Great Commission and the call to take the Gospel to the whole world.

The immediate and practical reason for this trip to Tyre was to retreat to a place where Jesus was less known...a place where Jesus could disciple His disciples. For the next several months, that's what they did. They found a house in Tyre, where they could stay for a while. **Mk. 7:24, 25** says, **Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet.** The secret of who Jesus was and where He was staying didn't remain secret for very long.

vs. 22-25 say, **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.** It's surprising and maybe even a little disturbing to read that Jesus was initially unresponsive to this woman in need. Though begging for help, Jesus didn't answer her. And we're thinking, *"What's going on here?"* The reason Jesus didn't respond immediately was to create a pause...a pause that would allow His disciples to absorb the situation. Something of significance was about to happen...a lesson that had to unfold slowly enough to allow them to take it all in. Instead of just witnessing another miracle...the disciples needed to face the prejudice so deeply rooted in their hearts.

Now the disciples wanted Jesus to send the woman away. Why was that? First, it was because of her gender...she was a woman and a noisy one at that. But they also wanted her sent away because of her racial background...according to **Mk. 7:26** she was **Syrophenician**...a Greek born in Syrian Phoenicia. The disciples may have also been offended by her skin color. She was a Canaanite. There was no rung on the ladder lower than Canaanite. The Canaanites were Israel's enemies and pagan squatters on the land God had given to His people. If Joshua's followers would have done what God commanded them to do, the wicked Canaanites would have been eliminated. So in the minds of the disciples, this woman had at least three strikes against her.

Then Jesus said something unexpected. He said, **"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."** That's what the disciples believed. This was policy right out of the Mishna...policy they lived by. I wonder if at that moment Jesus shot a glance at His disciples as if to say, *"Isn't that right boys?"* *Isn't that how you see it? I've come for you, but not for this woman or her kind!"* The word **only** spells exclusivity...like "members only" / "residents only" /...or "honor students only." It means some of you are in but the rest of you are out. Much of the world operates by this sort of prejudicial narrowness. And for the moment...so did the disciples.

So this pause when Jesus didn't respond was to allow His disciples to absorb the situation. His silence was for their benefit more than hers. The school of discipleship was in session. The lesson of the day centered on the wideness of God's mercy. But Jesus had another purpose. The woman needed clarification. She needed to know that Jesus is the **Son of David** and Messiah of Israel. As a Gentile, she had no claim on Him. She was an outsider as far as God's promises were concerned. Jesus owed her no miracle.

She also needed to understand that His power over demons was not some pagan magic but the power of the God of Israel in fulfillment of divine revelation. As John testified, Jesus is full of grace and truth...not just grace and not just truth. Jesus responded to her in a way that was similar to His conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. In **Jn. 4:22** Jesus said, **You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.** The Phoenicians worshipped a triad of deities. The Samaritans and Phoenicians worshipped in ignorance...neither nation had God's revelation. As a result their religion was confused and full of error. It was the product of human imagination. On the other hand, the God of Israel had revealed His salvation to the Jewish people. So the Samaritan and now this Syrophoenician, needed to hear that Jesus is the One and only Way to God. He is not a way, He is **the narrow way**. Every human being stands in desperate need of Jesus Christ. And listen...Jesus disallows syncretism...His name cannot be joined to paganism / spiritism / mysticism / animism / humanism or any other ism. That's why the conversation unfolded as it did. Jesus was defining and clarifying what must be understood about saving faith. And the Good News is this...she understood. She got the point. God's Spirit was at work. Her heart was opened to understand that Jesus is **Lord**. So, **v.25** says, **The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.**

In the clinical way we've been looking at this story, we overlook the agony of this mother. Even though she was a pagan, she loved her daughter and begged for her deliverance. Perhaps you've tried to console a child or grandchild with an earache or a toothache. The disciples needed to see and feel the suffering and misery beyond their borders. They needed to know that Gentile pain is just like Jewish pain and God cares about them just as much. This is a lesson often learned by a short term mission's trip. Seeing others in desperate need will change you forever.

What Jesus said next has caused more sanctified head scratching than almost any other verse in the Bible. In **v.26** **He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."** Really Jesus? Did we hear You right? Did You just refer to that woman as a dog?

Here's what a radical feminist wrote about these verses...*"The Canaanite is an aggressive single parent who here defies cultural taboos and acts to free Jesus from his sexism by catching him in a bad mood or with his compassion down, besting him in an argument and herself becoming the vehicle of his liberation and the deliverance of her daughter."* I want you to forget you ever heard that heresy from this pulpit. Sharon Ringe makes the Syrophoenician woman out to be the savior who rescues poor Jesus from his sexism and narrowness. That's unvarnished blasphemy! It's an example of the allegorical blindness of those who are unsaved and ignorant because they don't have God's Holy Spirit to enlighten them to the truth.

But this statement of Jesus is challenging to be sure! We put ourselves in the best position to understand it when we remember that Jesus knows all about every person before we ever speak a word. Have you ever tried to figure a person out?...to tune in to whatever wavelength they're on? It's hard to read some people. Am I right about that? There's a guy in Flushing I try to greet every-time I see him. But to date, I have no idea who the guy is and I think he wants to keep it that way. But Jesus never struggled to understand people. He knew all about the Syrophoenician woman just as He knew all about the woman at Jacob's well in Samaria. He knew what He could say to her / what she would understand / and He even knew how she would respond. **Psa. 139:4 - Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord.** I think this woman understood what Jesus was talking about better than His disciples did!

And let me assure you...no insult was intended and none was taken. Jesus was a perfect gentleman. **Mk. 7:24** says **they entered a house**. Jesus often drew analogies and parables from his surroundings. When He spoke of sheep, there was probably a herd grazing nearby.

When He said a wise man built his house on a rock...He may have pointed to a house under construction and maybe the owner of the house had a dog. The word translated **dog** here is a diminutive and not the same as the insulting slur the Jews used with reference to Gentiles. They used a word that refers to the wild, mangy scavengers that roamed every town and fed from every garbage dump. Junk yard dogs. The diminutive form of the word Jesus used refers to a pet...a domesticated dog...a house dog...a lap dog.

So His meaning went like this...just as the children in a house are fed before the family dog, the Gospel is offered to the Jew first. **Rom. 1:16 - I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.** David Brickner, the Executive Director of Jews for Jesus explains the phrase **first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.** He writes ...*"This means that God selected the Jewish people, not to be superior but to be servants of His purposes and servants of the Good News to the nations."*

In this analogy, the children (seated at God's table) represent the disciples and the Jewish people. They are God's family. In the divine plan to save the **whosoever's** of the world, the Jews were first to partake of the bread of life. As Jesus said to the woman of Samaria, **"salvation is from the Jews."** But praise God!...the Jews are not the **only** ones to benefit from God's grace. In **Jn.10:16** Jesus said, **I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.** That's us...we are the **other sheep.** But with respect to priority, timing and His brief 3 year ministry, Jesus ministered to God's chosen people first. He did this to fulfill covenants made centuries earlier. When Jesus sent out the Twelve, He instructed them this way...**"Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. – Matt. 10:5, 6**

But just suppose...(and this is entirely conjecture)...What if Jesus said what He did with a smile? The whole nuance of **v.26** would change. I mean, this woman knew the racial slur all too well ...she knew Canaanites were despised as though they were wild scavengers. But Jesus didn't use that term. With a smile and perhaps a twinkle in His eye, He used the term for a family pet...a lap dog. This friendly sort of exchange happens all the time and it seems to have happened back then. Remember, Jesus called James and John, "sons of thunder" or thunder boys. He knick-named Peter, "rock man." With a big grin, one of Jim's defensive coordinators in college often addressed his players as "ladies." He'd speak to those big fellas and say, *"Now listen up ladies, let's have a good practice today."*

And it's possible the woman responded with a grin. She said, **"Yes, Lord...but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."** *"Yes, Lord, you're right. That's all I am...I'm a just a dog, especially in the sight of your people. But even family pets eat the crumbs that fall from the table."* I won't go to the mat over this, but I think she may have sensed a light-hearted playfulness in the words of Jesus just as He knew she would. She evidently had a good sense of humor. She was quick thinking and witty. And notice, for the second time, she calls Him, **Lord.** This is a remarkable confession from the lips of a Gentile when compared to the unbelieving accusations Jesus received from His own people! Still reading between the lines, she showed an amazing confidence in His power. She felt it was no big deal for Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. She wasn't asking for a banquet of hocus pocus. She wasn't begging Jesus to perform some elaborate ritual. She believed a crumb of His mercy would be sufficient. *"Lord, just say the word. Just drop a crumb from the abundance of your grace...drop it under the table the way a scrap of food is given to a pet. Just do that and my daughter will be delivered."* She had mustard seed faith...the kind Jesus is worthy of. And Jesus loved it. William Barclay calls it, *"a sunny faith that wouldn't take no for an answer."* Our prayer lives should have this kind of confidence and persistence. And remember... this woman was a Canaanite...a Syrophenician. She came from a cursed city, with a background and a whole clan of relatives who were neck deep in idol worship.

But the Lord from heaven crossed the border and ignored every social barrier. The disciples saw a woman with three strikes against her, but Jesus didn't see her that way. She heard that Jesus had come to her town and she fought her way to Him. Then with unreserved acceptance, she embraced Him as **Lord**.

And this doesn't just happen...not for anybody! Saving faith is itself part of God's gift. God mercifully drew this woman to Himself and opened her eyes to the truth. Remember Peter's confession? After he confessed that Jesus is the Christ Jesus replied, "**Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.**" – **Matt. 16:17** Here Jesus displayed the miracle of grace that enables people in pagan darkness to see and believe. God draws people to Himself, reveals His truth, opens eyes and unstops ears. Does He do this before or after salvation? Yes!...before and after. **v. 28 - Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.**

2. Mercy for Gentile crowds – vs. 29-39 - Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?" "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish." He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was four thousand, besides women and children.

From Tyre and Sidon, Jesus and His disciples traveled south along the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee and then up a mountainside. **v.30** says, **Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them.** The location on the eastern shore of Galilee, plus the fact that **v.31** says **they praised the God of Israel**, suggests this crowd was predominantly Gentile. As we've said before, the healings Jesus performed were instantaneous / undeniable / and complete. No follow up visits, prescriptions or therapy was needed. The lame leaped for joy. The blind were given 20/20 vision. The crippled were instantly made whole. And by the way, the word translated **crippled** includes those who were missing legs and feet. So Jesus instantly created missing body parts. I once visited the prosthetics lab in Hines VA Hospital in Chicago. When Jesus returns He'll put that entire industry out of business. And Jesus performed these miracles whether people believed in Him or not. The miracles were His credentials...signs that He was the long awaited Messiah of Israel and the world.

v.31 says, **The people were amazed...And they praised the God of Israel.** The response of this Gentile crowd was so unlike the response of many in Israel. **Jn. 1:11** says, **He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.** But praise God for the next verse. **Jn.1:12** says, **Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...** Like every Gentile, this Syrophenician was **separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.** – **Eph. 2:12** But from the beginning, God's planned mercy that would cross every border and ignore every barrier to include any and all who will come to Him. No one is excluded. The disciples needed to learn this lesson and so do we.

But that's what a disciple is...a learner. The fact that these men still had much to learn along with some lessons to needing to be revisited is evident from **vs. 32, 33**.

Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?" Hey isn't this deja vu? Isn't this a repeat of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 recorded in the middle of **Matt. 14**? Yes it is. Except this time, Jesus performed the miracle for 4,000 Gentiles not 5,000 Galileans (plus women and children). This time the people had been without food for three days not just one. This time the supply of food on hand was 7 loaves and a few small fishes, that time there were 5 loaves and 2 fishes. This time there were 7 baskets full of leftovers, that time there were 12 and the baskets were different. This time the basket was big enough for a man to fit inside. It was the kind used to lower Paul through the opening in the wall at Damascus. - **Acts 9:25** But when Jesus fed the 5,000 the baskets were more like satchels...the kind a traveling Jew used to carry his lunch.

But here's the thing...though this is perhaps the second miraculous feeding (and I say "perhaps" because there could have been other feedings that were not recorded) the disciples still hadn't caught on to the fact that with Jesus all things are possible. With Jesus, there is no such thing as shortage. With Jesus, mercy and compassion are linked to creative power. So several months after Jesus fed the 5,000 in Galilee, the disciples are still asking...**"Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"** We're tempted to react to their question and say, "Daaaah!" ...But we don't dare because we know ourselves. We know that trust is never once and done. Each day brings new tests of faith...new circumstances that must be met with confidence in Him.

It's possible the disciples believed Jesus had the power to create food but doubted He would do it for Gentiles. Their prejudice may have showed up again. The better explanation is their lack of faith in Him and their lack of compassion for them. We see this in the next chapter. **16:8, 9** say, **Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among your-selves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?"** This verse proves there were two miracle feedings, not just one story told twice, as some insist. So Jesus fed this crowd just as He did earlier in Galilee. His method was the same. The miracle happened in His hands and the distribution was handled by His disciples. And once again, **They all ate and were satisfied.**

Here are two events that continue the story of the grace, truth and power of Jesus Christ. His grace is unbiased...His truth is unbending...and His power is unlimited. As Jeremiah said, **"Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. – Jer. 32:17** Do you trust Him to save you and change you? Have you committed your life to Him? He's coming again in power and great glory. He will establish a kingdom where sickness and deformity is eliminated and no one will ever go to bed hungry. He will bring to pass the idyllic conditions humanity longs for but can never have apart from Him.

But this passage also raises a question. It asks what border may Jesus want you to cross? What barrier may He want you to ignore? If Jesus was here today, where would He lead you? Which direction would He point? Where and to whom would He want you to go to reach someone for Him? We haven't yet come to the Great Commission. That's **chap. 28**. But we know what's waiting for us there. We know what He commanded us to do. Will you widen the circle of those you consider savable and ask God to help you reach them? Will you feel their pain and desperation and tell them about Jesus and His power to save?