

## It's Up to You 2023 (Week 7): Why did Jesus call the Canaanite Woman a "dog" in Matthew 15:21-28?

### **Yesterday's Sermon - In 10 Sentences or Less**

1. Yesterday's question was about one of the "hard sayings" of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew, and there were at least two important interpretive prerequisites to answering it: a) Matthew was read aloud to its original recipients, and b) those listeners had no other parts of the New Testament, and most likely no other written parts of the Bible, to help them understand the text.

2. The opening line of the story ("Jesus left that (previous) place") ties the story to what happened previously, namely a confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders about man-made traditions and hollow, heartless spirituality (see Matt. 15.1-20).

3. One of the main characters is a "Canaanite woman" who comes to Jesus shouting for help: as a Canaanite, she would have belonged to one of the three most hated non-Jewish groups (Samaritans and Romans being the other two).

4. Moreover, she was acting in an entirely countercultural way: as scholar Sharon Kupp writes, "In 1st century Palestinian culture, women were expected to be invisible. No Jewish man, especially one with a religious task or vocation like Jesus, would have expected to be approached by a woman, Jew or Gentile."

5. The Canaanite woman affirms that Jesus is both "Lord" and the promised Messianic "Son of David," which is in direct contrast to the fact that the Jewish crowds were unwilling to do that three chapters earlier (see Matt. 12.22-32) and that Jesus' own disciples won't till the Transfiguration two chapters later.

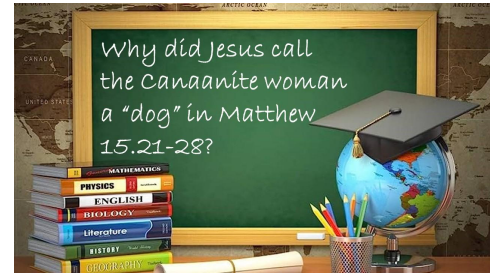
6. Jesus responds in a strangely off-putting way initially, saying that He was sent only to Israel, and then He seemingly dismisses her with a common racial slur for Gentiles ("dog").

7. Very quickly, however, there is an about-face, with Jesus lauding her "great faith," high praise reserved for only one other character in the gospel of Matthew, who, not coincidentally, also happened to be a non-Jew (the Roman centurion in Matt. 8.5-13).

8. So did Jesus really think He only came to Israel, mirroring the very narrow understanding of the Messiah's mission represented among 1st-century Jews?...In short, no, for example, from the very first verse of Matthew's gospel (Matt. 1.1) Jesus was connected to the promises made both to Abraham and David, which included universal blessing to all peoples, not just Israel.

9. So what on earth was Jesus doing?... He was forcibly exposing His Jewish disciples' prejudice and implicit bias, so that they would eventually be ready and willing to carry the good news to "all nations" (Mt. 28.16-20)...You can bet He'll be seeking to do the same thing for us 2000 years later.

10. Also, when Matt. 15.21-28 and 15.1-20 are read together, we see that often the greatest faith can be found in the people you think are the least likely to have it, and, conversely, being highly religious or respected is no guarantee of authentic faith, and in fact can work against it sometimes.



## Explore More this Week

1. Some scripture reading for you this week that ties into the story we studied yesterday:

- Read Matt. 15.1-20, the tete a tete between Jesus and the Pharisees/scribes that is the contrast to what happens in 15.21-28: [Matt 15.1-20 NRSVUE](#)

- The comparable antecedent story in Matthew's gospel is about a Roman centurion who shown superlative faith in Jesus: [Matt 8.5-13 NRSVUE](#)

- In a really neat literary tie-in that we didn't mention yesterday (because there wasn't time), Jesus predicts that non-Jewish lands, like Tyre and Sidon (the region in which Matt. 15.21-28 takes place), would respond to Him more positively had they been given the same chances that Israelite lands had: [Matt 11.20-30 NRSVUE](#)

- Later passages in the New Testament reveal that the disciples didn't grasp or commit to the lesson Jesus taught them in Matt. 15.21-28...for Peter, it took an alarming, but then transforming, visionary experience years later for him to "get it" finally: [Acts 10.1-11.18 NRSVUE](#)

2. To be human is to be biased, and often in ways we can't see about ourselves. Learn more about that from these two TED resources:

- [Prejudiced thoughts run through all our minds – the key is what we do with them](#) and
- [The prejudice you don't know you have | Havi Carel & Richard Pettigrew](#)

3. Two Christian reflections on bias and prejudice from a leading United Methodist resource site:

- [A Prejudice I Didn't Know I Had](#) and
- [Getting real with each other](#)

4. A great devotional on the Roman centurion's faith in Matthew 8, the prior parallel for the Canaanite woman's faith in Matthew's gospel: [O Lord, I Am Not Worthy](#)