

# FAITH OF A CANAANITE WOMAN

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Matthew 15:21–28

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Jesus answered [the Canaanite woman], “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.  
(Matt. 15:28)

Daily Bible Readings			
<b>M</b>	Apr. 22	1 Kgs. 17:8–16	God Provides for a Gentile Woman
<b>T</b>	Apr. 23	1 Kgs. 17:17–24	God’s Authority over Life and Death
<b>W</b>	Apr. 24	Luke 4:24–30	God Blesses Whomever God Will
<b>Th</b>	Apr. 25	Ps. 61	Hear My Cry, O God
<b>F</b>	Apr. 26	Ps. 20	May God Grant Your Heart’s Desire
<b>Sa</b>	Apr. 27	Jas. 4:1–10	God Gives Grace to the Humble

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

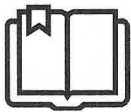
This story pushes buttons that may make us uncomfortable. On first read, we may not like what it says about Jesus. As we dig deeper, we may not like what it says about us. It meets us where we often find ourselves, faced with the choice between our worst instincts and our core values. It’s where we are when we walk or drive past someone on the street who is begging for help. It’s where we are when we hear news stories about “those people” who are not like us. It’s where we are when talk about prejudice and bias hits too close to home, and we are tempted to step away or answer with, “But what about . . .”

Our core values, as people of faith and followers of Jesus, tell us to answer with generosity, welcome, and hospitality. Our worst instincts lead us to cross the street, justify our exclusion, excuse our greed and ourselves. They are instincts born of our backgrounds, societal factors, and often our privilege. We might not even recognize their presence. When we see them in Jesus, however, we notice and wonder.

The woman we meet today doesn't let her worst instincts get in the way. She is focused and persistent. Her faith is great. It's the faith of an outsider, who is seen, heard, and answered. Her faith changes the insider: Jesus himself. We don't often like to consider Jesus being changeable. Surely, he is always right, right? We tend to also feel that way about ourselves, more often than warranted.

We all have a knot where our prejudices and assumptions lie. There has never been a better time to work at untangling it than now. This story asks us to confront our buried biases and ways we've participated—consciously or not—in systems that privilege some at the expense of others. That tension and knot may be just what needs untangling in ourselves. Lean into the task of loosening the knot today. Pick it apart gently. Follow the strands to see where they come from and where they are leading.

*Holy God, you continue to surprise us. Give us patience and persistence to untangle this story. Open our eyes to your grace today, for us, and all your children. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Matthew 15:21–28

**15:21** Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” <sup>23</sup>But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” <sup>24</sup>He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” <sup>25</sup>But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” <sup>26</sup>He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” <sup>27</sup>She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” <sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A CANAANITE WOMAN PLEADS

**W**e meet Jesus traveling north, up near the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon. Matthew records this interlude between stories in and around Galilee, where Jesus’ ministry has been spreading. Crowds of followers are growing; people are fed and

healed. But John the Baptist has been beheaded; the crowds keep pressing in on him, and Jesus seeks out time alone to pray. He has just had a contentious meeting with religious officials from Jerusalem over “the tradition of the elders” (15:2) and keeping the laws of Moses. Now he meets a woman with no power, who pushes even more buttons for him and us.

She’s a Canaanite, a Gentile. *Canaan* was the original name for the promised land to which Moses led Israel, and which Joshua helped them enter. In Jesus’ day and location, relations between Jews and Canaanites were fraught. Though Matthew records several Canaanite women in the genealogy of Jesus in chapter 1, there were long traditions warning about intermingling. Canaanites were “those people,” and even Jesus learned that growing up.

Distraught, the woman seeks Jesus out to heal her daughter. She shouts repeatedly for help. The word used here doesn’t mean just a raised voice, it means shrieking or crying out, like a woman in labor (Rev. 12:2). She screams out, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David” (Matt. 15:22). This is remarkable, not just for her boldness and volume, but because she calls Jesus “Son of David,” a title that recognizes him as the Jewish Messiah.

Jesus greets her with silence, then startles us by saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24). From our vantage point, we expect compassionate Jesus to move toward her with healing. But Jesus doesn’t. The woman moves toward him again, though. She kneels in a worshipful posture, pleading with words we know from psalms and our own prayers when God seems silent: “Lord, help me” (v. 25). Again, Jesus rebuffs her: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (v. 26). The woman is disrupting his primary mission to Jews, the children of Abraham (see Matt. 10:5b–6). He uses a common insult for Gentiles, calling her a dog. Hearing this from the mouth of Jesus, who just talked about our words defiling us in preceding verses, is confusing.

The woman is undeterred. She reminds Jesus that even dogs need feeding, and from his abundant table there is plenty to go around. Perhaps she heard he just fed over five thousand people with baskets of crumbs left over (14:15–21). Finally, Jesus recognizes and rewards her great faith, instantly healing her daughter.



**How does this story fit with your understanding of Jesus?**

## PREJUDICE, PERSISTENCE, AND PRAYER

Jesus shows us the fully human side of himself here. Like us, he belongs to a time and place with inherited prejudices and biases. Though he often demonstrates how God works across and beyond our assumed barriers, apparently, he still trips over them. The discomfort we feel over Jesus' words and initial lack of action highlights their uncharacteristic nature. Matthew has already shown us Jesus healing at the request of a Gentile, with his version of the centurion's servant in 8:5–13. But he hesitates here, far from home, when the asker is a woman, perhaps of a lower class. What if Jesus is subject to instincts of bias that he consciously works against at other times, like we are?

Just as Jesus shows us how hard it is to welcome others and to see them as our siblings, he also shows us how to work against our instincts to shut them out. He listens. He engages her in dialogue. And he is willing to change his mind and his focus. He doesn't double down on his prejudice. He doesn't give in to a scarcity model of grace or healing either. He recognizes that there is indeed plenty go around.

Jesus is changed by this persistent woman, who confronts him with his bias and the opportunity to really live by his words. Back in the Sermon on the Mount, he said two things back-to-back: "Do not give what is holy to dogs"; "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (7:6–7). The woman causes Jesus to wrestle with the intersection of those teachings. She begs for the door to open, right then and there. Later, after his death and resurrection, Jesus' mission clearly moves to "all the nations" with his commission to the disciples in 28:19. The woman sees that future already present when the healer comes to town, and she boldly claims it.

She shows us the power and promise of prayer. Our own pleadings do not go unheard, though God may at first seem silent. The theologian and pastor Walter Wink wrote, "When we pray we are not sending a letter to a celestial White House, where it is sorted among piles of others. We are engaged, rather, in an act of co-creation, in which one little sector of the universe rises up and becomes translucent, incandescent, a vibratory centre of power that radiates the power of the universe. History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being."<sup>1</sup>

1. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 186–87.



**What are your prayers today, and how can the woman's example change them?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD


Your faith undoubtedly gives you a picture of a future where things are better. And not just for you. It's a future where the sick are healed and the hungry are fed. Where peace, love, and justice rule. Where everyone is welcome and there is enough for all. The woman in our story shows us the power of persistent prayer, boldly calling for that future. She crosses manufactured barriers of race, gender, and culture to kneel before the one she calls *Lord*, even though her instincts scream the opposite. It's such an unusual display of faith that it breaks through Jesus' own human instincts and reminds him of his Messianic values.

We all have a knot where our prejudices and assumptions sit. There has never been a better time to work at untangling it than now. This story asks us to confront our buried biases and ways we've participated—consciously or not—in systems that privilege some at the expense of others. Even Jesus was willing to be called on it. It took him going outside his comfort zone and getting close to someone different from himself to do it. Indeed, it only happened because of the other's brave cry for a just world.

The Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis says, "Like our savior, we can get it wrong. And then, in close encounters with the 'other' we can have our hearts and minds changed. We can get it wrong. And then we can get it right. We have to get it right. . . . We, who follow Jesus in the Way, have to seek ways to racially and culturally diversify our communities and our lives, so we know the 'other' and can be changed by the 'other.'"<sup>2</sup>

Many churches are tackling these issues in new and creative ways. Intentional work on racial justice, LGBTQIA+ rights, refugee and immigration issues, and other forms of public witness are common themes among congregations willing to risk discomfort for the sake of the gospel. Your congregation may be one of them. If not, then perhaps it is time for someone to claim God's good future in the present and make some noise about it. It surely is time for persistent prayer about change.

The work to be done is not just for institutions. It is also for individuals. Like Jesus, we get so caught up in what seems urgent that we miss what is important, what our values really require. Consider where the knots are for you between your instincts and your values, particularly regarding people different from you. You just might meet Jesus there.

 **Where are you being called to untangle knots of discomfort or discrimination with others? What step can you take first?**

2. Jacqui Lewis, "Updated! on Scripture: Jesus Is Woke; We Should Be Too Matthew 15:10-28 the Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis," *Day 1, The Alliance for Christian Media*, August 14, 2017, [bit.ly/TPWJesusWoke](http://bit.ly/TPWJesusWoke).

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.*

1. Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites were commanded to keep a distance from the Canaanites and other foreign peoples because of their worship of false gods (Lev. 18:3). Whenever the Israelites disobeyed and conformed to these cultures, they were severely disciplined by God (see, for example, Ps. 106:34–43). At the time of this story, devout Jews would stay as far away as possible from Canaanites (Gentiles) and would certainly not expect God to show any mercy or compassion on them. Although Jesus' words seem harsh (for example, “dogs” in Matt. 15:26), they are not an inaccurate reflection of traditional Jewish perspectives on Canaanite Gentiles.
2. Jesus engages the Canaanite woman in an escalating repartee that tests her understanding of God's nature and Jesus' identity and mission. This sort of repartee was common in the first century as a way of testing one's opponent to prove character, intelligence, honor, and so forth (see Mark 12).
3. The woman's responses accept that Israel is special to God and the focus of Jesus' ministry (Matt. 15:26–27). They also demonstrate that she recognizes that God is not limited to just Israel; even the leftovers of God's gifts to Israel are enough to feed the rest of the world (v. 27).
4. Jesus' presence in this Gentile region and his interaction with the woman are both anomalous within his ministry, making this no accidental encounter. Though his ministry was indeed to Israel, he calls those who would follow in his steps out of our comfort zones, placing our faith in the limitless God, and reaching out to those in the margins.