

Bread for the World

Matthew 15:21-39

Jesus came as the Jewish messiah to save “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24). All the disciples are Israelites, and He tells them to stay within Israel when preaching His kingdom (Matt. 10:5-6). And yet today the church is filled with Gentiles as more people from every tongue and tribe believe the good news all the time. It’s in this story that we see the beginning of the nations coming to Christ in fulfillment of God’s promise to save the world.

The Unclean

Jesus meets the Canaanite woman in the pagan region of Tyre and Sidon that (v. 21). Sidon gets its name from the firstborn of son of Canaan (Gen. 10:15), a great-grandson of Noah by way of Ham. Jesus has offended the Pharisees who will not honor Him, so He departs into foreign territory where this Gentile woman cries out to Him for mercy because her daughter is severely demon-possessed (v. 22). He has three responses to her. At first, puzzling to many, He speaks “not a word” (v. 23). She asks for mercy and He ignores her entirely. Isn’t this what it feels like when God doesn’t answer us right away? Then she cries after the disciples who implore Jesus to deal with her so that she’ll go away (v. 23). They probably want Him to help her, which makes the most sense of His reply: “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24). If they didn’t want Him to help her, they could have responded, “Right, which is why we sent her away. She is no lost sheep.” The disciples just told Jesus to tone it down because the Pharisees were offended by Him (15:12). Now they’re telling Him to take care of this disruptive woman. But Jesus isn’t deterred from His mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel either by blind guides or loud Canaanites. She comes again, this time bowing down to worship and saying “Lord, help me!” (v. 25). Most offensively (but perhaps we’re getting to know Jesus better by now), He responds: “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs” (v. 26). Jews referred to Gentiles as “dogs” because they were unclean. Dogs are scavenger animals, usually wild and dangerous in packs, and also not very smart: “Like a dog that returns to its vomit, so is a fool who repeats his foolishness” (Prov. 26:11). Gentiles did not trust Yahweh or keep His law, so Jesus would not take the food meant for those who would receive it from Him and give it to others who only wanted it for carnal reasons. She is undeterred: “‘Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered and said to her, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour” (vv. 27-28). First, He ignores her and tells His disciples why He should. Then He tells her why it’s not a good idea to help her, insulting her status. And then He bestows on her the greatest praise: “Great is your faith” (cf. Matt. 8:10). She knows where the food is, why Jesus has the power to heal her daughter, and so calls on the Lord, the Son of David to act. She was unclean, estranged from the living God, and her daughter was demon-infested, but no more. Through affliction she sought Jesus and was answered according to her desire. The Pharisees in the previous story invested false categories of uncleanness, but she actually came from unclean people. Pharisaical hearts produced true uncleanness, but she cried out of from a heart that trusted Christ and wanted His grace. Hyper Calvinism falsely teaches that because God foreknows and foreordains all that comes to pass, our actions and desires do not matter. But rightly believing in God’s sovereignty drives you to be like this Gentile woman, knowing that God ordains the means as well as the ends: “He fulfills the desires of those who fear Him; He hears their cry and saves them” (Ps. 145:19; cf. Ps. 119:71). Let it be done according to your faith.

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The Broken

For the third time Jesus ascends a mountain (v. 29). Last time it was after feeding the 5000 (14:23), and before that He gave the sermon on the mount. Again, He sits like Yahweh and Moses at the top of Sinai, ready to give the law of liberty. On Sinai only the elders could come part way up the mountain, and the people were kept from touching it at the bottom, cleansing themselves even there for being so near to the burning holiness God (Ex. 19:12-17). Here the multitude comes right up to Jesus and bring four kinds of broken bodies to lay at His feet: lame, crippled, blind, and mute, as well as many others (vv. 30). The multitude marvel when the mute speak, the maimed are whole, the lame walk, and the blind see; they glorify *the God of Israel* (v. 31). They call on Yahweh and behold Him in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. We take it for granted that God cares for people of all conditions and abilities, and that we should as well. The most common thinking in the history of the world has been to ask who sinned that someone would be born this way, or which sin brought these hard circumstances: "Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him'" (Jn. 9:3). Jesus did not just change and heal these people; He transformed the world as a result. Roman society had no hospitals but only *iatreia*, places without beds or nurses where only the upper class could get diagnosed. Countless Christian individual believers cared for the sick in the ancient world, and institutions grew out of it. The church father Jerome appointed gifted women who essentially became the first nurses to attend the sick in Rome. Paula (347-404) was one, as was Fabiola who helped found the hospital there in A.D. 390. Benedict organized healthcare workers called infirmarians at the Monte Casino monastery in Italy in the 500s, similar to the hospital that had been established by Basil in Caesarea. The Knights Hospitalers of St. John organized nurses to care for the leprosy in Jerusalem in the 1100s. The famous founder of modern nursing Florence Nightingale was inspired by the work of German pastor Theodor Fliedner whose hundred-bed hospital grew from housing one poor prisoner in his backyard cottage. Nightingale established a nursing school in London in 1860 and thousands have been modeled after it. Survival of the fittest teaches that the weak and infirm are less valuable to the species. But Scripture teaches that all people are made in God's image, equal in dignity and worth, with inalienable rights. We follow our Lord in caring for the weak and needy, and thus see the works of God on display whether He heals people now or later. The healed Gentiles glorify the God of Israel.

The 4000

Like the feeding of the 5000, Jesus is on a mountain, has compassion on the multitude, the disciples doubt the amount of food, and He equips them to feed the crowd. We have a Gentile woman and from Mark's gospel we know that Jesus is in Decapolis, a Gentile region (Mk. 8:31). The feeding of the 5000 resulted in 12 baskets leftover, the number of Israel. The 4000 is associated with the four corners of the earth, which symbolizes the world as a whole, with seven, the number of completion, leftover. Jesus does not give crumbs to one persistent Gentile, but brings multitudes His table: "And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (Is. 11:12; cf. Job 37:3). He will command the apostles to disciple all the nations in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, but He is already welcoming them to His table (Matt. 28:18-20; Gen. 17:5).

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