

Pentecost XIII: Matthew 15:21-28: The Faith of the Canaanite Woman

1. At this point in the life of Jesus we are less than one year from His suffering and death. Only Matthew and Mark (7:24-30) give us this account. In both Gospels it follows the account of Jesus' severe words to the hypocritical Pharisees and scribes who came to Him from Jerusalem. After these words He left the land of Israel and journeyed to the north and west, not to escape His enemies, but to be alone with His disciples. Did He actually enter the territory of Tyre and Sidon? Commentators debate this point. Mk. 7:31 plainly indicates that He did enter this territory at least later. There we read that He left the territory of Tyre and passed through Sidon.
2. Understandably the commentators struggle in their attempt to fathom and understand the attitude of Jesus toward this Syrophoenician woman. But, in any case, from this text we should learn what is said in stanza four of hymn 514 *TLH*: "Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace; Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face." Very often the Christian thinks that God's providence is at variance with what God's Word says. Under such circumstances the Christian needs rivet his attention on the Person of Christ and what the Word says about Him. That's the important thing.
3. Vs. 21: ἐξελθὼν ἐκεῖθεν, out of the land of Israel. ἀνεχώρησεν, He retreated in retirement, not out of fear. εἰς, at this point likely "to" and not "into". Only AV and NASB have "into". AAT has "to the neighborhood of etc".
4. Vs. 22: καὶ ἰδοὺ denotes something noteworthy, in this case that a Gentile woman would approach Him with such confidence. Fahling quotes Farrar: "By language this woman was Greek; by birth a Canaanite, a heathen; by allegiance a Roman subject, a Syrophenician, of Syria, as distinguished from a Phenician of Carthage; and by faith a first-fruit of that harvest which was to spring up in Phenicia, in Greece, in Carthage, and in Rome." ἐξελθοῦσα, this word plainly indicates that she came out from those territories, therefore Jesus had not yet entered. Plainly He did later. By the way, note the correspondence between ἐξελθὼν, 21, and ἐξελθοῦσα here. Might that indicate that Jesus, in His omniscience, had planned this encounter? In actuality, He was looking for her, not vice versa. ἔκραζεν, ingressive and continued action, a strong verb denoting dire circumstances and deep conviction. λέγουσα denotes manner. Her cry came out in her words. ἐλέησον, to have pity on the wretched and miserable. Note με. Her sympathy for her daughter was so acute that she felt it as here very own grief. This surely includes natural affection but the words which follow indicate a higher type of love. She was already believing and therefore loving too. κύριε υἱὸς Δαυὶδ, plainly a confession that He is the Messiah. How had she learned this? Stoeckhardt says: "It was through the reports that she heard of the great deeds of Christ, which had been broadcast across the borders of Israel into the surrounding lands of the heathen, that she had come to faith." In a fnt. Fahling notes Mk. 3:8 and Lk. 6:17 and remarks: "People from Tyre and Sidon were among those who listened to Jesus and witnessed His miracles. The title was used and heard in Mt. 9:27 and 12:23." Lenski: "She plainly reveals that she has knowledge of the Messianic hopes of Israel and had heard that they were being connected with Jesus as the promised great descendant of King David. It is not necessary to regard her as a Jewish proselyte." The translations of κακῶς δαιμονίζεται are interesting: AAT: "A devil is making my daughter miserable." TEV: "Has a demon and is in a terrible condition." NASB: "Is cruelly demon-possessed." Neither Matthew nor Mark explain this further. Mk. 7:30 might indicate that the girl was bedfast, but we can't be certain.
5. Vs. 23: Note that δὲ, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 all mean "but", all counter-statements. The first sentence in vs. 23 denotes Jesus' utter silence. Stoeckhardt quotes Luther: "Look how Christ drives her faith deep

into her heart that it becomes strong and firm. Is this the gracious and friendly Lord? He is silent as a stone. This is a severe blow when God shows Himself so serious, angry, and distant, and conceals His grace and help. We must also learn to cling alone to the Word, although God pretends to be different than what the Word says of Him." Evidently Jesus silently kept on walking as she followed Him. By the way, Mk. 7:24 informs us that Jesus entered a house and did not wish to be recognized but did not succeed in this. We don't know precisely at which point Jesus entered the house. καὶ, 23, perhaps means "and therefore", because Jesus had not answered her. The disciples approached Him, perhaps one by one. Under the circumstances ἠρώτου (variant ἠρώτων) means "urged". Thus five of our translations. Jesus wanted no one to recognize Him. The woman was divulging His identity. The commentaries agree that the command Ἀπόλυσον αὐτήν implies granting her her request. In addition to that, evidently at least to a certain extent she was an annoyance: AAT: "she's yelling after us". TEV: "she is following us and making all this noise". NASB: "she is shouting out after us". Note that κρᾶζει is present tense and ὀπισθεν ἡμῶν clearly means that she kept following. She is persistent.

6. Vs. 24: It is clear that Jesus answered the disciples but because the disciples are not mentioned likely the woman heard this too. Jesus' answer is one which the disciples would readily understand. Cf. Mt. 10:5,6, where part of this sentence is found verbatim. Therefore, the disciples do not answer Jesus again. Bengel remarks: "The 24th vs. is to be understood, not with reference to the whole mediatorial office, but only our Lord's preaching and miracles." Stoeckhardt: "Jesus' sending to Israel did not exclude that He showed grace to the heathen and received those who came to Him in faith." Fahling: "In His state of humiliation His prophetic activity should be limited to Israel according to the flesh. After He would be exalted, He would draw ALL men to Himself (Jn. 12:32)." Lenski: "All those present must know that this in no way implies a transfer of his ministry from the Jews to the Gentiles or even an inclusion of the Gentiles into his Messianic ministry. . . . As soon as the divine plan had been worked out, it would be carried to all the world." The rule is laid down at Rom. 2:9,10. The Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:7ff), the centurion of Capernaum (Mt. 8:1-13) and the Syrophenician woman are the exception, not the rule. Note the emphasis on ἀπολωλότα with the repeated article. The participle denotes a state of lost condition. οἴκου Ἰσραὴλ is adjectival genitive, limiting it to the Covenant nation. On sheep and Shepherd compare Ps. 95.
7. Vs. 25: It is noteworthy that the disciples do not answer but the woman does. We cannot be certain that she heard what He said in vs. 25 but that she persisted is plain. Note again that, as in the cases above, δὲ means "but". She could not be deterred. ἐλθοῦσα is circumstantial. Perhaps at this point Jesus entered the house and the woman followed (Mk. 7:24-26). In any case, she prostrated herself before Jesus. For the second time she addresses Him as Lord. She speaks as if the misery of her daughter were her very own.
8. Vs. 26: "To take the bread of the children and to throw it to the puppies (housedogs) is not a good thing." Bengel remarks with reference to the word "children": "Our Lord spoke severly to the Jews themselves, but honorably of them when speaking to others. See Jn. 4:22." And with reference to κυνᾶριον he says: "The word κυνᾶριον is a diminutive (denoting affection) and thereby Jesus gives a handle to the woman to take hold of." Stoeckhardt: "This means that it is not proper that I withdraw my services from the children of the chosen people and turn unto the unclean heathen. This was a hard judgment on the woman, apparently a final 'No' to her plea. But it only seems that way." Then he quotes Luther: "There is more 'yes' in this than 'no'; 'yes', pure 'yes' is in it, but indeed deep and secretly, and it only appears as a pure 'no'." Fahling: "So He called her a dog! But the word is not as harsh as it sounds; for the expression used by the Lord (κυνᾶριον) refers to canine household pets rather than to the dogs on the street." (Bruce). Eight of our translations read "dogs"

but NKJV has "little dogs" and JB has "house dogs".

9. Vs. 27: Note δὲ again. For the third time she addresses Him as κύριε. Ναὶ denotes complete assent. καὶ γὰρ does not denote contrast as is indicated by AV, NEB, NKJV and RSV which translate "yet", but rather causation "for even". Bengel notes: "The woman seizes upon the appellation κυνάρια, for she says immediately καὶ γὰρ which must be rendered 'for even'. The particle καὶ partly assents, partly, as it were, places on our Lord's tongue the assent to her prayers." Luther: "She catches the Lord Christ with His own Words. Yes, still more, with the rights of a dog she gains the rights of a child. Now where will he go, the dear Jesus? He has caught Himself and must help her. But know this well, He loves to be caught in this way. If we only had the skill of this woman to catch God in His own judgment and say: 'Yes, Lord, it is true, I am a sinner and not worthy of Thy grace, but you have promised forgiveness and didst not come to call the righteous, but, like St. Paul says, I Tim. 1:15, to save sinners.' Behold, the Lord must then through His own judgment, have mercy on us." Fahling: "If at the Lord's table she may not enjoy the position of children, she would be permitted to share at least the portion given to dogs. The Lord is conquered. The successful struggling of this unhoused Gentile sheep brings to mind the wrestling of Jacob with God (Gen. 32:26)." Ylvisaker: "A faith so humble, but withal so trusting, could not but prevail upon Him who so willingly allows Himself to be conquered." And Lenski: "Here is faith in all its lowly beauty." ἐσθθει is the present of customary action. The first ἀπὸ is partitive, the second denotes separation. τῶν κυρτων "of the masters" likely denotes the children mentioned in vs. 26. The children are the puppies' masters. If that is true, what the woman says clearly indicates her feeling of utter unworthiness not only with reference to the Lord but also in comparison with the Covenant people. What the woman says is axiomatic. In vs. 26, also axiomatic, Jesus had said that custom dictates that it is not good to take the bread (the meal) from the children and to throw it to the puppies. The woman agrees. But, likewise, she says that the children, as masters, do not forbid the puppies to eat the bits which fall from the table. In fact, children love to see this happen, as all experienced parents will agree, though they may even forbid the children to do this. Experience teaches us that, though parents forbid, children will deliberately, out of love for the pets, let some food fall for the pets. The language of this woman is not only axiomatic and good logic but also the language of faith.
10. Vs. 28: Until this point it was always δὲ "but" (vss. 23, 24, 25, 26, 27). But now it's τότε "then finally". This has been quite a conversation. This is only the second occurrence of αὐτῇ "to her" (indirect object). The first was at vs. 23. Jesus' answers in vss. 24 and 26 were not limited to her. But in vs. 28 it surely is. By the way, it has been said that the Lord's final answer to this woman was caused, in part, by the disciples who requested (vs. 23) that He send her away after granting her request (implicit in the text). If that is so, all concerned concurred as to what should happen: the disciples on the basis of former experience; the woman who persistently believed in Him as the Lord, the Son of David, the Messiah, the fulfiller of promises; and the Lord Himself Who would not deny His promises. Stoeckhardt: "He said to the woman 'Great is thy faith' which consists in that man completely despairs of himself, finds no comfort in himself, and only clings to the grace of the Lord, and to the Word of His grace." On ὡς θέλει Bengel remarks: "There is faith even in wishing." Fahling quotes Farrar: "Not one moment longer did the Lord now prolong the agony of her suspense," and also Bruce: "What a contrast between the native 'traditionalism' (Judaism) which He had just experienced in the house of Israel and this 'simple faith on pagan soil!'" And, finally, Ylvisaker: "This is the only miracle, wrought by Jesus during His stay in the northwest border territory of Galilee, of which we have any record. The account is a prophetic object-lesson of the salvation which should come also to the Gentiles. And from this circumstance the disciples should know that when Israel turned its back upon the Gospel, it would find a fruitful soil in the Gentile world (Keil)." Jesus often said: "He who humbles himself shall be exalted." Lk. 18:14. The humility of repentance is truly a

gift of God, not an inherent quality of the flesh. What a wonderful thing to say, by the grace of God: "I am chief of sinners." I Tim. 1:15. Such a person is assured that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners and will never turn such a person away. ἀπὸ τῆς ὥρας ἐκείνης at the end of vs. 28, is translated "right then" (LB); "at (from) that (very) moment" (TEV, JB, NEB, AAT); "instantly" (RSV); "at once" (NASB).