

Faith of a Canaanite Woman

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

Focus Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

Key Verse: 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. Matthew 15:28

MATTHEW 15:21-28 (NRSV UE)

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

22 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."

23 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."

24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

28 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.

MATTHEW 15:21-28 (KJV)

21 Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.

22 And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.

23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.

24 But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

25 Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.

26 But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.

27 And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

KEY TERMS

- **Marginalized** – Living or considered being on the margins (edges) of a group or society; outside the mainstream.
- **Gentiles** – Non-Jews.
- **Myopic** – Short-sightedness; having narrow views of a matter.
- **Repartee** – Wordplay; a crafty response.
- **Socio-economic** – Relating to (a person's) social and economic status.

INTRODUCTION

We have various ways to approach this text. For people with a great appetite to relate scripture to social and political realities, the passage is excellent for highlighting the struggles poor and marginalized people endure in our society. Others have pointed to Jesus' behavior, which, in a casual reading, seemed insulting by calling the woman a dog. But we must twist the text out of its historical and social context to form this opinion.

The truth is, despite our pleadings, religious rituals, and/or faith offerings, God does not always grant our desires with microwave or AI speed.

Although those are interesting angles, we want to travel a route which keeps the spiritual integrity of the text, to improve maturity in our devotional life. To do this, we must observe that we live in the age of microwave and AI technology, where people demand everything be done immediately and without effort. This mentality has permeated our politics, and unfortunately, into our theology as well. As a result, many popular religious shows feed the idea that we can demand or order God to deliver what we want when we want it.

That is a fallacy. The truth is, despite our pleadings, religious rituals, and/or faith offerings, God does not always grant our desires with microwave or AI speed. Sometimes,

God must first prepare us for the delivery of our requests. This preparation involves stirring in us the measure of faith that we have. Consider this aspect as you wrestle with the text.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Although the text states it plainly, we emphasize it here. In verse 21, despite the traditional disdain his people (the Jews) had for the Gentiles, Jesus deliberately left the Jewish town of Galilee and went purposely into the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. He was not there by accident or forced circumstances. He decided to go there. This must be the jump-off point for any meaningful discussion of the text.

So, if he chose to visit a Gentile region, what would have been his normal expectation? Who did he expect to meet? Gentiles! Sit on this when you hear people forcing the text to say Jesus insulted the woman. Rather, see the events that followed

in the same way we see John 4:4 with the woman at the well. Jesus had a divine purpose for going there, and part of that purpose was an encounter with the Gentile woman. So, we likewise must dare to minister among “the dogs” in our society: among the social dogs, political dogs, and religious dogs.

Verse 23 exposes in gripping colors the contrast in attitudes between the Lord and the disciples. Jesus went out of his way to get within the reach of the woman. The disciples, in the reverse, went out of their way to separate Jesus from the woman. There is a lesson here. We must never let the value people put on us, based on their traditional myopic views, prevent us from seeing our MasterCard value in the

eyes of God. Whenever we reach out to God sincerely, he always sees us as priceless. By the way, this is the same view God has of the people we cannot stand on occasions.

Verse 22 can be tricky for persons who want to play out racial and gender bias in the passage. By addressing Jesus as

the “Son of David,” the woman anchored the encounter in her understanding of the Jewish religious system and prophecies. She opened the door to the inherent biases but appealed to Jesus to favor her despite those biases. Read her response in verse 27 in that context.

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And what are the implications of that approach for us today? Often, we as believers can waste time telling ourselves we cannot get what is due to us because of all the biases in the prevailing systems. This woman opened her heart for God's favor, despite the social and religious biases of her era. That is the faith we should practice. We must assure ourselves that the hands of our God can reach us through any systematic bias and or discrimination. If we must first remove the evil system for God to reach us, then the evil system is greater than our God. Think of the implications of that suggestion.

To understand Jesus' words and behavior in this encounter, we must understand the debating customs of that period. Jesus engaged in a type of wordplay (verbal sparring) that tested the woman's understanding of God's true character. He wanted to challenge her view of God beyond the normal Jewish-biased image of God. This repartee pushed the Canaanite

woman to see in Jesus (the Messiah), a God who would hear and respond to someone outside the privileged class of Jews.

That sort of engagement was common among some Jewish rabbis. It was a way to test an opponent's character, intelligence, honor, etc. This verbal device forced the opponent to defend or prove

the validity of his or her argument. See another example of this in Mark 12. Note also at Mark 12:9, Jesus highlighted the God he wanted the Canaanite woman to see: a God who would open the kingdom to "others" (non-Jews).

SANKOFA

In your Bible, the Canaanite woman

has no name, but in the history books, her name is Madam C. J. Walker, the visionary behind the Madam C.J. Walker Company and related haircare products. She was born Sarah Breedlove in 1867, a time when the rulers of the society went out of their way to stifle the upward mobility of black people. Some writers on

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that period said life then for black people was worse than during slavery. Only a black woman with a rare form of insanity could entertain a vision of owning her own business and becoming a millionaire. Yet C. J. Walker saw through her daunting circumstances to a vision of a life that was better, much better, than being just a “washer” (a common job for black women then).

With support and encouragers from the AME Church (St. Louis and Denver), C.J. Walker, like the Canaanite woman, reached for what was not normally available to people like her. And like the Canaanite woman, she received lavishly. Read her story at <https://www.history.com/news/madam-cj-walker-business-millionaire> or similar postings.

Her life and achievements say to disadvantaged people that they can receive from God and succeed, despite stifling discrimination. And it is not always necessary to change systems or people’s ugly perceptions of them. The favor of God can deliver for us despite the

obstacles we faced. And did C.J. Walker face obstacles? You decide.

She was born to slaves, became an orphan before age 10, had to flee from living with an abusive brother-in-law, married at age 14, and was widowed at age 16. On the personal level, she had two other marriages, was partially uneducated, and suffered from a serious

hair disease. Did she have obstacles?

So how could a woman with 50 of the 52 cards of life stacked against her rise to become a great millionaire, philanthropist, and advocate for woman’s rights? She did it the same way all great achievers do. Madam

Walker stopped

looking for people to complain to, and stopped focusing on who was to blame for her plight. Instead, she looked for opportunities, and in a walk of faith worked those opportunities, despite the stacked deck life gave her. In short, it was faith and vision in action. The same qualities the Canaanite woman drew on.

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CASE STUDY

Although it is a moot point, at the heart of the text was a question about the character and related favor of God. Was God an exclusive Jewish God, or was God a God who was accessible to all people irrespective of race, gender, or social standing? The Canaanite woman, with the help of Jesus, saw the latter view of God.

But what about us today? What is our view of God? Is God white, black, male, female, conservative, or progressive? As noted elsewhere, God made humans in his own image. And it seems that people try to return the favor to God by making God in the image that works for them. Thus, some ministers sell us

an ultra-conservative God who works only through them and their preferences. This God wants a world that keeps the status quo, which allows the dominant classes to remain in place, and keeps all other persons settling for the “crumbs” that fall from the masters’ tables.


At the other extreme, we find an ultra-

progressive God, who wants to turn the status quo on its head and put into practice the scripture which says the first shall be last and the last the first. This God wants to make all the current powerbrokers and rulers into slaves and make the current struggling workers the billionaire and the powerbrokers. This God rejects all the traditional rules and rituals and seems to operate without any guardrails. Floating somewhere between these two extremes

are various versions of God.

Hence, we must know what the Bible teaches about the character of God. Our favorite answer to that question starts in Psalm 89:14-15:
 “¹⁴ Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne. Unfailing love and truth walk before

you as attendants. ¹⁵ Happy are those who hear the joyful call to worship, for they will walk in the light of your presence, Lord.” From this angle, no one person or race has a monopoly on God. The almighty is available to all persons who operate in righteousness, justice, love, truth, and sincere worship of God.



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While God chose the Jewish nation to reveal certain divine traits to humanity, God is not Jewish, white, black, or brown. The Spirit of the Lord works through all societies and all cultures for people who respect God's demands for righteousness, justice, love, truth, and sincere worship. This view of God put the emphasis on the spirit of our worship rather than on the specific worship rituals. Like the Canaanite woman, we do not have to find another Jesus. The Savior of the Bible is as much ours as he is the Lord of other races. But also like the Gentile woman, we must be careful in accepting the character of God that other people want to feed us. This matter is one of life and death, for the view of God we hold decides the life we live, and our view of life after death.

LIFE APPLICATION

Jesus responded to the Gentile woman, despite his declaration that his priority was the lost sheep of Israel. The woman lived on the fringes of Jewish society. Today, we also meet people who live on the fringes of our society.

Therefore, as representatives of Christ, we must assess how our outreach to such persons reflects God's love for marginalized people.

Consider this in a realistic manner. We cannot solve all the problems of marginalized people. But like Jesus, we get opportunities occasionally to go out of our normal path to help poor or hurting people. Take some quality time to

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consider how well you respond to the needs of those persons. Your efforts may be as an individual, as a member of an outreach group, or through your support of programs that cater to needy folks. Do not pressure yourself unduly on this matter, but consider the opportunities we get to help social outcasts both within and outside

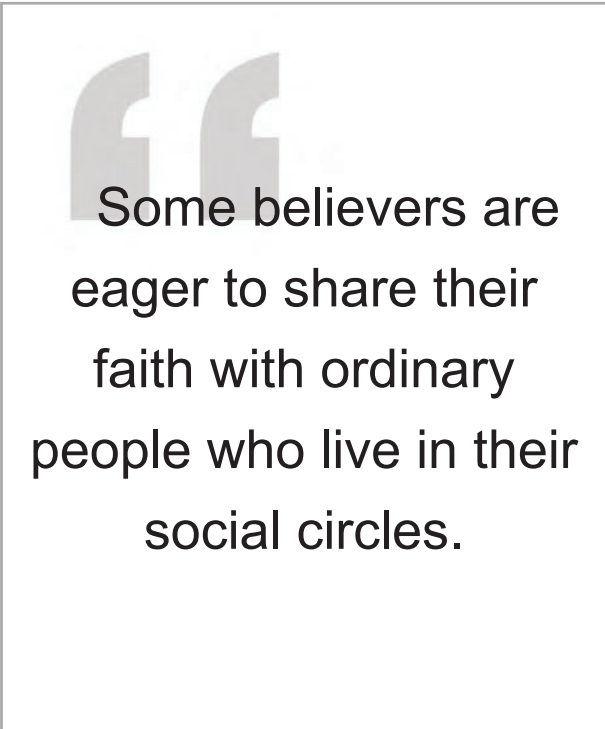
our faith community.

The text challenges us to consider how we see people. Soberly consider the extent to which factors like race, gender, political affiliation, social position, and religious denominations influence your decisions to render assistance to a person in need. In ideal circumstances,

we should see the needs of people before we see their social label. Granted, this is not easy. Yet, the mere exercise of considering how well we see people's needs above their social labels forces us to see the degree to which we are reflecting the attitudes of Christ.

Normally, when we discuss helping people, we focus on their material needs. And this is wonderful. Still, we must recognize that people's greatest needs are often emotional and spiritual. And this issue can show a bias on our part. It relates to whom we approach in our evangelism efforts.

Some believers are eager to share their faith with ordinary people who live in their social circles. They have no hesitation in sharing the Gospel with the poor and working poor. However, they are more hesitant about approaching persons in the higher classes of society. They can be timid when approaching doctors, lawyers, politicians, business owners, bankers, and insurance executives with the Good News.



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Consider whether you or your group practice such biases or fears. If indeed one person needs to hear the Gospel, all people need to hear the Gospel. You may want to discuss this matter with your pastor, evangelist, or mature Christian brother or sister. With the right training and practice, we can kill the fear of sharing the Gospel with people in the higher social classes. Jesus set the example for us. He spoke freely with people of all socio-economic classes and nationalities.

Here is an exercise you may find useful. You can do this alone or with a small group of Christian brothers and sisters. At a convenient time, take a stroll along a familiar street in your church's district. Make notes of the needy people you see or encounter. Do not engage anyone on this first trip unless it is an emergency. Just make some notes of the people in need and what people can do to assist them.

At the end of the exercise, consider which case or cases you will seek to help, either as an individual or with the

cooperation of others. Some of your plans will be short-term and others for the longer term. Naturally, you will exercise the appropriate caution and wisdom for each case.

This exercise will reveal three important things. First, helping people is often much easier than we are imagining. Second, there are people around us who are open to helping others, but usually they do not want to start an engagement. They will readily assist people who are brave enough to take the lead. Third, it is easy to share the Gospel as we help needy people.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is it crucial to have the right view

of God's identity and character?

2. What are the dangers, if any, of describing God in terms of race and gender?
3. In terms of life today, what lessons can we learn from the life and achievements of Madam C.J. Walker (**Sankofa**)?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," *AMEC Hymnal #84*

Closing Prayer: All-embracing God, guide my understanding of your true character and love for me. Help me to walk in a way that is worthy of your support. I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

April 29–May 5

Monday	Psalm 35:1-7, 22-28 (Vindicate Me, O Lord My God)
Tuesday	Psalm 112 (Blessed Are They Who Fear God)
Wednesday	Acts 3:12-26 (Repent and Turn to God)
Thursday	John 3:1-8, 13-17 (God so Loved the World)
Friday	Psalm 5 (Lord, Lead Me in Your Righteousness)
Saturday	1 John 1:1–2:2 (Christ Our Atoning Sacrifice)
Sunday	Romans 3:21-30 (Atonement by Christ's Blood)