

*Commentary for Lesson 12*

*August 23, 2020*

## **Great Faith**

**Focal Passage: Matthew 15:21-28**

**Background Text: Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-29**

**Note:** For those readers who use supplementary commentaries to prepare for each week's lesson, we will post downloadable commentary on AdultBibleStudies.com through the summer quarter. We will publish an annual commentary for purchase for Fall 2020–Summer 2021.

### **Encounter With Gentiles (Matthew 15:21-29)**

This part of Matthew 15 holds a crucial place in the emergence of the Christian church. Gentiles were finding their way into the community of the followers of Jesus. The response of the church to this mingling with non-Jews is symbolized by Jesus' response to Gentile people in the final three episodes of Chapter 15.

"Tyre and Sidon" (Matthew 15:21) are in the region now occupied by Lebanon on the Mediterranean coast. "Canaanite" (verse 22) means a descendant of the people in Palestine before the Israelites entered at the end of the Exodus. Mark 7:26 identifies the woman as Greek because she spoke that language, but also as Syrophenician, meaning that she came from Phoenicia. The central point lies in the facts that she was a Gentile, belonging to a people historically at enmity with Israel, and that the meeting occurred outside Israel and at her instigation.

The exchange between Jesus and the woman raises troublesome questions. Jesus already had met with great faith among the Gentiles (9:32-33), so why would he seem to put her off? He may have wanted to emphasize that his mission was still first to the nation of Israel. As the conversation developed, Jesus' replies seem heartless: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (verse 26). Her quick retort, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs," broke through Jesus' testing of her faith and motivation. He said, "You have great faith" (NIV). Her daughter was instantly healed.

Jesus' power to heal caused such wonder among the Gentiles that they "praised the God of Israel" (verse 31). If the church in Matthew's day wondered about a mission to the Gentiles, here certainly was the charter.

The nameless Canaanite woman should hold an honored place in the Christian church. She called out to Jesus for help and mercy. And, although she was not of the covenant people, he answered her. Her

voice still calls from outside our churches in the voices of people not part of the Christian community but in great need of help, mercy, understanding, and faith.

### **The Status of the Non-Jew (Mark 7:24-30)**

The area of Tyre and Sidon (Mark 7:24) embraced all of Phoenicia. That Jesus “entered a house” raises questions with some commentators: Whose house? How did he know anyone was there? Mark was unconcerned with such problems. His interests are clear in the statement that Jesus did not want anyone to know he was there, but “he could not be hid” (verse 24). We recognize the paradoxical combination of hiddenness and openness. The stage is set for an encounter with a Gentile, among whom also Jesus’ reputation has spread.

There appeared an unnamed woman whose daughter was possessed by “an unclean” (NRSV) or “evil” (NIV) “spirit.” The woman sought an exorcism, having presumably heard of Jesus’ reputation. It is significant that she was a “Greek” (NIV) or “Gentile” (NRSV), “a Syrophoenician” by birth (verse 26), and not, therefore, among the chosen people.

Jesus hesitated to comply with her request to cast the demon out of her daughter. His comment to her about taking the children’s bread and throwing it to the dogs (verse 27) hardly seems kind. The saying, no doubt, expressed a certain Jewish narrowness: They were the children; the Gentiles were the dogs. Considering that Jews did not care much for dogs, the saying sounds like a Palestinian proverb denigrating the place of Gentiles.

The woman’s clever response (verse 28), however, gained Jesus’ admiration. At least the crumbs ought to go to the non-Jew, she suggested. Jesus commended her for what she said (verse 29), with the result that her daughter was healed. The woman then went home and found her daughter well and the demon gone (verse 30).

The story is best understood when seen from the perspective of the later church and its issue of Jew and Gentile together. Jesus’ seeming reluctance to deal with this pagan woman points to the uncertainty with which the first church moved into the Gentile mission. The modest commendation that Jesus gave the woman—no characteristic mention of her faith—also shows the difficulty the church had in dealing with the non-Jew. But at the same time, Mark is clearly telling us that Jesus himself approved the inclusion of even the pagans in the Kingdom.

# Adult Bible Studies **Commentary**

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