

The Syrophenician Woman

Matt. 15:21-28; Mk. 7:24-30

Introduction:

1. Jesus was often untraditional in His approach to things.
 - a. This prompted the Pharisees and scribes to ask such questions as, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?” (Matt. 15:2).
 - b. Sometimes the disciples felt the tension of cultural expectations considering Jesus’ actions. In John 4:27 they were amazed at him speaking with a woman. They didn’t say anything, mind you, but were amazed, nevertheless. Besides she was a Samaritan and “Jews don’t have any dealings with Samaritans” (4:9).
2. The account of we have just read brings up the tensions between Jews and Gentiles, between men and women and perhaps between Jesus and His disciples. What is happening in this text? How did it affect the disciples? How is it meant to affect us?

Discussion:

I. Who is this woman anyway?

- A. Matthew identifies her as a Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon.
 1. For the Jew that identifies her as outside of Israel. She is no descendent of Abraham. She is not numbered among the chosen of God.
 2. Paul identifies such Gentiles as “excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).
- B. Mark identifies her as “a Gentile, of the Syrophenician race” (7:26). I might remind you that Matthew was an eyewitness to the event, but Mark received his information second hand. But both are quite clear in identifying that there is an issue with her genetic background.
- C. Jesus has acted in unconventional ways before.
 1. Back in Matt. 8:5ff Jesus had healed a Roman centurion’s servant. He commended the centurion and remarked, “I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.” He went on to say, “Many will come from east and west and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom, but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness.”
 2. Matthew seems to make a point of recording the unconventionality of Jesus.
 - a. He has magi from the east celebrating the Jewish Kings arrival (2:1ff).
 - b. He notes that Jesus begins His ministry “in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, beyond the Jordan in Galilee of the Gentiles” (4:12ff).
 - c. He has Him healing in Syria (4:14ff).
 - d. And yet, he records Jesus sending out the 12 on the limited commission saying, “Do **not** go in the way of the Gentiles, and do **not** enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5-6).

3. Here in this account of this encounter with this woman there are several factors in play.

II. The context in which this account occurs in Matthew and Mark can give us insight into how all these factors unfold.

- A. Both accounts place it after some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem have questioned Jesus: "Why do your disciples break the traditions of the elders" (Matt. 15:1ff; Mk. 7:1ff).
- B. Jesus then calls the crowd together and tells them that it is not what goes into a man that defiles him but that which proceeds out of the heart (Matt. 15:10ff; Mk. 7:14ff).
- C. Then the disciples came and said, "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?" (Matt. 15:12ff).
 1. Maybe they thought he should not have offended them.
 2. He answered them with a parable (Matt. 15:13-14).
 3. Peter then asked for an explanation of the parable (Matt. 15:15ff). Mark says, "His disciples questioned Him about the parable" (7:17ff). This took place in the house after they had left the crowd.
 4. Note Mark 7:18ff as Jesus responded to the disciples. There is an interesting parenthetical statement made in verse 19: (Thus He declared all foods clean.) Here is another element of tension. He is declaring all foods clean???? What does that mean in this Jewish context??? Much later, Peter is going to see a vision and be taught that he can eat all foods. He is going to interpret that to mean that Gentiles, like Cornelius, can enter the kingdom (Acts 10, 11, 15). It would seem that Peter has learned that the heart is the determining factor in one's relationship to God.
- D. It is in the context of the disciples' question that the account of the Syrophenician woman is told.
 1. She cries out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." "Son of David"??? What does she know about "the Son of David?"
 2. Her daughter is demon-possessed.
 3. Jesus does not answer her.
 4. Jesus said, "I was sent only to the house of Israel."
 5. Additionally, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."
 6. Some have said He was brutal, offensive, chauvinistic, insolent, atrocious (F. W. Beare, 342, 343).
 7. BUT what if Jesus is responding like the disciples would have, given their cultural presuppositions????? Note in Matt. 15:23 they have said, "Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us." Is the teacher teaching the disciples????? Is He teaching them to look at hearts instead of genetics???? Is He teaching them to look for humility and FAITH???
- E. Jesus departs from there and goes into the Decapolis (Mk. 7:31).
 1. Decapolis was a league of 10 cities, all of which were on the other side of the Jordan, except one.
 2. This area was inhabited mostly by Gentiles and was Hellenistic in culture. Quite different than Jewish Jerusalem.

3. But it was here that Jesus performed many miracles (Matt. 15:30-31; Cf. Isa. 35:5; 61:1ff).
4. It was here that Jesus fed the 4,000 men, besides women and children, saying that He felt compassion for them. Is He teaching the disciples to feed those who are hungry and thirsting for righteousness (Matt. 5:6)? Is He teaching them that it is the pure in heart who shall see God (Matt. 5:8)? That it is the poor in spirit who will enter the kingdom (Matt. 5:3); that those who mourn will be comforted (Matt. 5:4); that the gentle shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5)????? Is He teaching the disciples to be the salt and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13ff)????? Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:20).
5. Mark says, "The Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, to test Him. **He sighed deeply in His spirit**" (8:11). (Note the rest of the connection that Mark makes connecting this to Jesus' teaching about being aware of the leaven of the Pharisees (8:14ff). The whole episode began with the issue of the disciples washing their hands before they ate (Matt. 15:1; Mk. 7:2).

Conclusion:

1. Are we restricting the kingdom from those who have good and faithful hearts?
2. Are we bringing healing to those who are in despair? Jesus healed the Syrophenician's daughter. He cared for her mother, the care giver, who cried, "Have mercy on me." Are we sending away those who are crying for relief?
3. Are we aware that men do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God?
4. Are you arguing with Jesus, seeking a sign from heaven???
5. Have you given your heart to God?