

Crumbs from the Father's Table

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Text: Matt 15:21-39

We come now to an event that has proven difficult to understand. Jesus appears to be cruel in the way he speaks to this lady. Some see bigotry here. Failing to understand this may lead us to a warped understanding of Jesus. I'm getting ahead of myself here, but I need to say this.

I've heard it many times, and I've heard many people say it. We even have a hymn that refers to "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild." Jesus just loved everybody. We hear it a lot in discussions of sexual morality: Love is love and Jesus is love. Does Jesus love everybody? Absolutely. Is Jesus' love unconditional? Absolutely not! Are you surprised by that?

What we mean when we say that God's love is unconditional is that we can do whatever we wish and God will still love us. That part is true. But what we also mean is that we can do whatever we want and God places no conditions on us. That is, God's love means that God accepts us as we are and no change is required. Part of the problem, at least, lies in our misunderstanding of God's love. There are four Greek words that translate to one English word. That is, there are four different kinds of love – but we have only one word in English to describe all four. There is the love of things; the love of parents for their children; the love between friends; and God's holy love. Husband and wife share the first three in certain measure. Army buddies share the third. But what the world means when they talk about love is the first: *eros*. Sensual love. The love of sensation; including smells, tastes in food, music, literature, feelings, including touch, emotion, and lust. The problem with "love is love" is that it isn't. The problem with "love is love" is that we think in terms of *eros*, sensation, and we end up treating people as objects to be enjoyed instead of persons with unique value. That sort of love is what leads us to sin. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that all sin is a violation of love.

So when Jesus was confronted by people who needed healing, he often gave orders - Go and stop sinning. The woman caught in adultery is an example (Jn 8:1-11). Jesus did not condemn her, but he told her to leave her life of sin (Jn 8:11). And he told the disciples, "*Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching*" (Jn 14:23) and "*If you keep my commands you will remain in my love ...*" (Jn 15:10). That is, the reward of love is conditional upon obedience. God's love demands obedience. That means that God may accept us as we are, but he expects us to change. He calls us to live holy lives. God loves us too much to leave us as he finds us. We are not called to simply believe in God; we are called to believe and be reconciled to God.

Now, back to our story. The Jewish territories of Jesus' time were Judea in the south and Galilee in the north, separated by Samaria. The Samaritans were descended from Jews who had been left behind in the Babylonian Exile and had subsequently intermarried with the local nomadic

Canaanite tribes. They were considered by the Jews to be “half-Jew” and impure. Jewish travelers would make a point of avoiding Samaritan territories to avoid being defiled, and Samaritans were not allowed to visit the temple in Jerusalem. Jews were not confined to Judea and Galilee. Many Jews lived in other parts of the empire, and there were Jewish enclaves in many places including Rome itself. North of the Galilee was the province of Syria, also called Syro-Phoenicia. Most of the population were descended, to some degree, from the Phoenicians, an ancient sea-going people who mostly inhabited coastal areas north of Israel. Major Phoenician cities included the two in this story, Tyre and Sidon. This is also the region known in Solomon’s time as Lebanon, and the modern nation of Lebanon. There were Jewish enclaves in both Tyre and Sidon, though Jewish populations there were small. So Matthew makes the point that Jesus has traveled outside of Jewish territory into the land of foreigners.

There he is confronted by a Canaanite woman, probably of Phoenician descent. Her need is dire: her daughter is possessed by a demon and suffers terribly from her affliction. Here’s one hard part: Jesus doesn’t respond to her at all. He ignores her. Why does Jesus ignore her? We aren’t told. But she is a foreigner imposing on him. He ignores her but she doesn’t stop her pleading. Finally, the disciples have had enough of the whining and ask Jesus to send her away. He does respond to them: *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”* He is Israel’s Messiah. But this annoying woman does not let up. She kneels at his feet and cries out for help.

Here’s the second hard part. Jesus response appears to be highly insulting. *“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”* Wow! We are horrified at Jesus’ response. This is not like the Jesus we know. And I heard a pastor recently suggest that because this is so out of character for Jesus that it probably shouldn’t be in the Bible. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who just loves everybody. His words appear bigoted and cruel. But wait! It’s not what it looks like. Let me explain.

There are two words in Greek that translate to “dog” in English. In Matthew 7:6, Jesus said that we should not give what is holy to the dogs. The root word there is κύων (kuon), and it refers to street dogs, strays, feral dogs, the flea-bitten, mangy mutt that digs through the garbage for food. But here, Jesus uses a different word, κυνάρῳ (kunaríois). It is a derivative of *kuon*, but here it is an affectionate term, used to refer to a lap dog, a pet, a child’s puppy. It’s the difference between a dog you fear and a dog you love.

What Jesus is actually telling her is that it is not right to feed the pets what belongs to the children. It is not right to let your child go hungry while you give his food to the puppy. Every parent agrees with that. We feed our children their food and feed the pets their food.

Notice that she does not appear offended by his words. But she does have an answer. “You’re right. But the puppies eat the crumbs that fall from the table.” And sometimes the children deliberately drop scraps from their plate to the puppy waiting beside them. But here’s the thing: Jesus was not hating her. He was not leaving her out. He was actually loving her, and including her. He was giving her a chance. And she took it. She did not turn away in disgust. She held out her hands for the crumbs that might fall from the master’s table. She knew her turn was coming. Jesus

may have been Messiah to the Jews first, but she believed that he was her Messiah, too. And she was right. Jesus responded to her faith and her daughter was healed.

Now, we continue with Jesus going back to Galilee, not really a very great distance. Jesus then spent the day healing all who came to him. Verse 30: *The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.* If we're paying attention, we see that Matthew is again reiterating the signs of the Messiah. The deaf hear; the blind see. And the people appear to understand.

Jesus sees deeper than the physical needs. Over the years, I have begun to understand that the problems people face are not necessarily what they appear to be. We often attribute homelessness, for example, to drug addiction, alcoholism, or mental illness. Economist Thomas Sowell points out that there are economic and political forces that contribute to the problem; that make housing expensive, including zoning laws and permitting regulations. But it really goes deeper than that. There are also spiritual problems. People who are not at peace, who are struggling with life, with family relationships, and people estranged from God. They have lost any sense of meaning or value of their lives. They think nobody cares about them – and in many cases, that is probably true. They are not just lost bodies; they are lost souls. They have thrown up their hands and cried out, "What's the point!"

Jesus saw physical blindness, but he also saw spiritual blindness. He saw physical deafness, but also spiritual deafness. Physical weakness, certainly, but also spiritual weakness. Fear, anxiety, confusion, disillusionment. By acting on the physical needs we see, we may be able to reach deeper and find a way to the spiritual need. So, Jesus attended to their physical needs.

"I have compassion for these people ..." By the way, the word for compassion literally means to get your guts in a knot. My intestines are twisted. That is, true compassion, as Jesus expressed it, causes physical symptoms, physical pain, perhaps. Their need hurts us, so that we must find a way to help.

"... they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry or they may collapse on the way." Their own supplies had run out. But here's something I wish the American church could understand: their hunger for Jesus was greater than their physical hunger. They missed meals so they wouldn't miss Jesus. They wanted Jesus more than food. When have we ever wanted Jesus more than anything? We sing, "As the deer pants for the water so my soul longeth after Thee" but we don't. We don't hunger for holiness. We sing "All for Jesus" and whine when the pastor talks about tithing. We don't long for Jesus as if he were shade from the desert sun. We don't cling to his words as if they were more than life to us. To stay with Jesus for three days? They spent three days with Jesus; we struggle to spend an hour. Jesus has long since ceased to be a priority for many. What about me? What about you? Does my soul long for Jesus? Am I hungry for the bread of life?

Somehow they find a few fish and a little bread. Jesus does what he did before: He blessed the bread and broke it; gave thanks for the fish and broke them. The disciples distributed the crumbs and it was enough. The crowd was fed and went away satisfied. Matthew says the crowd consisted

of 4,000 men plus women and children. And the disciples gathered up the leftovers, as before. You will notice that the numbers are different, and I'm not going to speculate on the meaning of the numbers. But something else struck me:

You know that Matthew puts things together for a reason. We may not understand his reasons, but we look for the connections. I began to wonder – in the middle of the night when I could not sleep for pain – what the connection might be between the Canaanite woman that the feeding of the 4,000. What if it's the crumbs from the master's table? The Greek uses two different words. The woman begs for crumbs, left-overs. In both miracles of bread, the word is "broken pieces." I know they're different, and I may be making too big a deal out of this. But in both situations, whether crumbs or broken pieces, to me they amount to pretty much the same thing. What if Jesus is trying to tell us that there's enough left over for the "puppies" of the world, for the outsiders? What if Jesus is trying to tell us that he's not just feeding the righteous, but there's an invitation to the sinners, as well? What if this is a nod to the Syrian woman that, indeed, the Master has thought of her and included here? There is, indeed, enough to go around; enough for all to eat and be satisfied.

I think we make an unintentional mistake in reading these two stories. It is that, unconsciously, we assume that the crowd in Galilee was all Jews, and that somehow, Jesus is compassionate toward Jews and a bit harsh toward Gentiles like the Canaanite woman. But remember this: there were undoubtedly a lot of Roman soldiers keeping an eye on things. Because of it's location between the Decapolis region and the Syrian province, there would have been a lot of cross traffic. It makes complete sense to suggest that that crowd included Canaanites, perhaps even that one woman and her daughter. And the crowd included people from the Decapolis region. It may have also included Samaritans from not far south. I think we may safely assume that the crowd that day included both "children" and "puppies." And there is bread enough.

It tells me, too, that there is still bread enough. Those who hunger for Christ ... Those who long for his touch ... Those who are thirsty ... Those who are confused ... Those who feel shut out ... Those who are lonely ... Those who are sick ... Those who are lost ... There is bread enough. Jesus came to give you the bread of life. You are not left out. *"I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may faint along the way."* Jesus set the table and calls to all who will hear, all who need, "Come, eat." There is bread enough.