

Good people go to heaven. That's the belief of most Australians, including many who have no regular religious practice. The logic is that God is good and only opens the doors of heaven to people who deserve to be there – good people who have lived a good life full of good deeds.

This belief surfaces in funeral eulogies which catalogue the essential goodness and good deeds of the dead person, and speak of them “being up there, looking down on us”.

It also permeates Australian culture, which most Australians tend to idolize, and is expressed in valuing good people, good reputation, racial and cultural superiority, Western democracy, power, wealth, and status. Australians believe these things achieve the personal glory we need to impress God.

But King Jesus taught and modelled a reversal of these values as he taught about his salvation and his Kingdom rule in the hearts and minds of people.

It is not good people from a particular racial or ethnic group who will be saved and enter into heaven, but bad people who recognize their desperate need for forgiveness and who are willing to join a new race and culture, identified by his values, and which idolizes him.

We see this reversal clearly in **the big picture storyline** in this section of Matthew's account of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus' Kingdom is already established and will thrive, despite opposition from Jesus local community, the royal household, and the religious leaders.

Jesus is the powerful Lord of the universe, compassionate and gracious in saving his people from their sin, bringing them into his new spiritual Kingdom, identified with him, and shaped by his rule.

At first glance the details of the next three incidents in verses 21-39 don't appear related either to each other, or to verses 1-20. But once again this is why thinking in big picture terms is so important. They create profound impact through contrast.

Verses 1-20 highlight Jesus' **CONDEMNATION** of the Scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem.

What an unexpected development because they were very religious men whose lives were devoted to studying God's word, praying, observing religious festivals and holy days, offering sacrifices, and doing everything in their power to obey God's laws in every detail.

Verses 21-28 highlights Jesus' **COMMENDATION** of a simple peasant woman wanting help for her child. Again, an unexpected development. The woman was a Canaanite gentile, the hated enemy of Israel, and according to the traditions of the Scribes and Pharisees, permanently unclean and cut off from God.

And there is profound contrast in responses to Jesus – **REJECTION and WORSHIP**. Chapters 15 & 16 each begin with Jesus being confronted by the Jewish religious leaders.

Their hearts were increasingly hostile and angry towards Jesus because he was not saying and doing what they thought Messiah should and would say and do. Jesus exposes their lack of understanding of God and what is acceptable to him.

This bookends three contrasting incidents verses 21-39, which occurred in gentile territory. The gentile woman shows better understanding than the Jewish religious scholars, addressing Jesus as Messiah, or Son of David, asks for grace and mercy for her daughter's healing.

Likewise in verses 29-31, gentiles flocked to Jesus, believing he could heal their sick. Their encounter with Jesus was life-changing such that they glorified or worshipped the God of Israel.

And in verses 32-39 Jesus feeds more than 4000 gentiles. He wanted them to know they would get more than crumbs of grace. They would be included in his new Exodus rescue, brought to Jesus despite their sin, given life and nurtured. Their response – to eat and be satisfied with the provision of Jesus.

Now, let's dive into **the details of encountering Jesus** which reveal more of Jesus' heart and mission and highlight the conclusions people form about him.

Jesus heads North-West towards the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, upwards of 70-100km into gentile territory, predominantly inhabited by descendants of the original Canaanites. Like all gentiles they were despised and called 'dogs' by the religious Jews because they were unclean.

A gentile woman comes to Jesus revealing her heart.

She calls him Lord, acknowledging him as a great teacher and worthy of her loyalty and obedience.

She calls him Son of David, acknowledging him as the Messiah Jewish prophecy had spoken of.

She believes Jesus is God with power over the spirit realm and begs him to heal her daughter.

Jesus' response is surprising given the woman's desperation and given that Jesus was known for his compassion. He appears to ignore her.

The woman persists until the disciples are brought into the action, revealing their hearts. They are offended at the woman with no sense of compassion or mercy for her plight. They want Jesus to tell her to get lost!

Finally, having set the stage for profound teaching, Jesus engages with the woman, drawing from her an understanding of Jewish historical theology, and an understanding of Jesus, which the scribes and pharisees failed to display.

Verse 24 Jesus says - I am the Messiah. I see you know your desperate need of what I can offer, but my primary focus is on the lost sheep of Israel, my special covenant people.

Verse 25 She persists, asking nothing but mercy and rescue as she unashamedly begs at Jesus' feet.

Verse 26 Jesus speaks again – You can understand that it wouldn't be right to give what God has graciously given for his needy children to someone who is outside the family, a gentile like you.

Verse 27 She persists, not offended by Jesus addressing her as the Jews thought of all gentiles; not offended by Jesus exposing her lack of status and lack of goodness before God; not protesting at God's right to show grace to his people alone; not presuming or demanding any help from Jesus;

BUT convinced God's grace and mercy would overflow from God's special people such that she could get a small crumb of God's grace – more than enough to save her daughter.

Verse 28 Jesus commends her for her understanding and insight and grants her the grace and mercy she has pleaded for, healing her daughter instantly.

What a visual teaching outcome! What a contrast in her experience of Jesus to that of the top religious men of the day, who came to Jesus in their goodness and pride, only to receive his condemnation.

Jesus responds so warmly and generously to the woman's knowledge of her own heart, and to her knowledge of God and his grace flowing to the whole world through his special people Israel, and to her total lack of entitlement but persistent pleading for grace and mercy.

But there's more! Reinforcing the point, verses 29-31, catalogues a massive demonstration of his mission to dispense grace and mercy in the healing of gentile sinners, a picture of his saving renewing power that would follow in his death for sin on the cross.

As many as had the attitude of this woman towards Jesus and his power, were healed and brought to glorify or worship the Lord!

So, what is Jesus teaching about his Kingdom and himself?

First, his kingdom is a universal spiritual reality.

The Jews as a whole, and the Jewish religious and political leaders particularly had cherry-picked God's word, especially the prophets. They believed passionately that Messiah would come and make Israel great again by destroying their political enemies who were also judgement-deserving gentile nations.

They longed for Messiah to establish his Kingdom in purity and righteousness, believing that God's covenant people would be the pure and righteous in this Kingdom.

But Matthew deliberately puts verses 30-31 in the language of Isaiah, who with all the prophets was clear that Messiah would be light and life first to God's special people and then to the gentiles as well.

Messiah would build a worldwide multi-racial Kingdom, so radical it could be considered a new race altogether, not identified by ethnic tribal history, but by identity with King Jesus and the renewing power of Holy Spirit.

This is the glory of the church which Paul speaks of in Ephesians and other New Testament writers celebrate. Old dividing walls of hostility are removed by Jesus – political, social, ethnic, religious divisions – and one new humanity whose life and shape and loyalty is to Jesus and all other died-for people regardless of background and heritage.

Second, the key to renewal or salvation is in personal response to Jesus.

This Canaanite, gentile woman had nothing in terms of power, status, wealth, racial pedigree, reputation, or identity – things which the Scribes and pharisees made much of. BUT she really knew herself – a sinful outsider, undeserving of anything but God's judgment.

She knew God to be full of grace and mercy and concerned for all people everywhere regardless of race, and hopes, therefore, for just a crumb of grace and mercy.

She knew Jesus to be her only hope of renewal and a fresh start for both her and her daughter, and boldly claims him as her saviour and Lord.

This heart response to Jesus unlocked the grace and mercy and renewal she sought. And the doors of heaven were opened not only to her, but to countless other gentiles who responded to Jesus with the same humility, confidence, and hope of renewal.

Friends, going back to my introduction – it is not good people who come to Jesus with a list of their own merit and religious performance who will be saved and inherit heaven, but bad people who recognize their own guilty, sinful hearts and respond to Jesus' invitation to come and receive in abundance what you don't deserve in the least.

Third, privilege doesn't necessarily mean salvation, but may be a death-trap.

The Jews had every privilege imaginable. They prided themselves on being closest to God of all nations, enjoying special covenant relationship with him.

They had God's written word regarding Messiah and salvation, which they learned and recited. They had the temple and sacrifices to remind them of God's gracious provision for their sin so that the clean God could continue to relate to them as unclean people. They had God's covenant promise to love them, to be their God, and to keep them as his special people.

Yet for all their privilege Jesus endures growing unbelief in the Jewish crowds, rejection by his home community in Nazareth, and by the Royal household, and by the Jewish religious leaders.

What a frightening but obvious truth. Privilege of itself doesn't count for anything when it comes to finding favour with God. For all their privilege they continued in their rebellious heart attitude, confident that by their own religious performance, and by virtue of being born in Israel they would be acceptable to God.

Ask yourself – have you been caught in the same trap? Being part of our church family does not mean you have experienced salvation and renewal at heart.

You may have been part of this church family from birth, read God's word, hear sermons, be in church each week, argue doctrine in the Bible, be a member, and even hold a position in the church. You can enjoy all the privileges and still not believe, not have repented, not know God's favour at all.

Of themselves these things don't make a person a Christian. You need a personal encounter with Jesus. But remember Jesus is the friend of sinners. He offers grace, mercy, salvation, and renewal to all who will come to him as their only hope. Throw yourself on his mercy today!