

# Matthew 15:21-28

August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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We have a very interesting Gospel today. If you have participated in any of our Alpha courses or any of the other programs we have been having here at IHM, one of the things we are encouraging people to do is to read the Gospels, because it is within the Gospels that we get to know who Jesus is. We read the Gospels to get to know Jesus' story. We learn how He spoke, how He acted, how He taught, what He taught, how He loved.

If you decided to take us up on that challenge, and somehow this was the first Gospel story you turned to – you would have to say, the picture this reading paints of Jesus, is not a very good one. In fact, Jesus seems to treat this Canaanite woman in a pretty rude manner. He first just totally ignores her plea to heal her tormented daughter. Then He basically rebukes her saying, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* And finally, he flat out insults her, telling her, *“It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.”* What is going on here? How do we resolve Jesus' seemingly harsh treatment of this woman, with his total self-giving love for us poured out on the Cross?

Looking at the reading we are told, *“Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.”* This is an important detail, because the district of Tyre and Sidon was located to the North of Galilee, and was a predominantly non-Jewish, or Gentile, area. In this Gentile region, a Canaanite woman approaches Jesus. The fact that the woman is a Canaanite is also important because the Canaanites were the ancestral enemies of the Israelite people. This enmity went back to the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt. The “Promised Land”, that land flowing with milk and honey, the one the Lord God promised to deliver to the

Israelite people, also happened to be called the “Land of Canaan”. The conflict between the two peoples as Israel took possession of this territory is chronicled in the Book of Joshua.

Memories in the Middle East tend to go way back, even today, and as Dr. Brant Pitre, who likes to put the Gospel stories in their First Century Jewish context, says that at Jesus’ time the Jews considered the Canaanites to be a particularly wicked people, a people who were immersed in idolatry and child sacrifice. Maybe this explains Jesus’ reaction to this woman. There are some commentators who say that Jesus is drawing out all that enmity that existed between the two peoples to show that these ancient feuds can be set aside through faith in Him.

I think this is a good explanation. I think this is possibly the explanation the Church is putting forward through the selection of this Sunday’s readings. Many of you are aware the Church selects the Sunday readings in such a way as to draw connections between the Old Testament First Reading, the Responsorial Psalm, and the Gospel. This is not always the case, but quite often that happens. Certainly, the First Reading from Isaiah speaks of salvation and deliverance to those who keep justice and do righteousness, and then continues on about foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, to love the Lord, and to be His servants. Dr. Pitre points out that to a First Century Jew the prophecy of a foreigner ministering as a priest to the Lord, would have been really hard to believe; only Jews did that, but we see that prophecy being fulfilled today. Our Responsorial Psalm for today reinforces that connection saying, *“Let all the peoples praise thee!”*

The idea that salvation is open to all people who sincerely seek God is certainly an important one, but I want to focus on two other very important lessons this reading teaches us about the spiritual life. The first lesson this Gospel teaches us, is how to approach God in prayer. One of the most important aspects of our lives as a disciple of Jesus Christ is our prayer life. It is

through prayer that we develop our relationship with Jesus. For many of us who are pursuing a deeper and richer relationship with Him, prayer can be a challenge. Many of us struggle with the idea of being able to connect with the invisible and all-mighty God. However, the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel shows us how to touch the heart of God. First, she recognizes that Jesus is the right person to go to with her need. She doesn't care about all that past history, about all of that past hatred. She acknowledges Him as Lord and makes her plea. When Jesus ignores her, she does not give up. When the disciples ask Him to send her away, she continues to cry out. When Jesus tells her, His mission does not include her or her daughter, she kneels before Him and begs for His help. When He insults her, she responds with one of the best lines in the Gospels, and it is not often someone gets the better of Jesus. Her response shows respect, humility, and wit. Jesus cannot refuse her request.

The Canaanite woman teaches us three keys to praying well. The first key is perseverance. I think we all understand the value of this virtue, because if you have ever been successful at anything you attempted, you most likely succeeded because you refused to give up on your goal. Why should our prayer life be any different?

The second key we are shown today is humility. Certainly, because of our pride and self-satisfaction, true humility is a much harder virtue to master,. In his book, *"Thirsting for Prayer"* Fr. Jacque Phillipe tells us, *"Humility means recognizing that everything we are and have is a totally gratuitous gift from God's love and that we can attribute absolutely nothing to ourselves."* He goes on to say, *"Humility also means consenting peacefully to our limitations and weaknesses - 'loving one's littleness and poverty', as St. Therese of Lisieux puts it."*

The third key to praying well is that we need to pray in faith. All through her exchange with Jesus the Canaanite woman never wavered in her belief that Jesus was the one who could heal her daughter. Going back to Fr. Phillippe's book, *"Thirsting for Prayer"*, which I highly recommend, he says, *"as soon as we start to pray we are making an act of faith: that God exists, that it is worthwhile speaking to Him and listening for what He will say, that He loves us, that it is a good thing to spend some of our time with Him, etc. Every prayer contains an act of faith that is implicit, but absolutely fundamental."* When we approach God with perseverance, humility, and faith, He will hear our prayer.

Earlier I said that this Gospel teaches us two important lessons, the first being how to approach God, the second important lesson for us today is how God approaches us. I propose that we can reconcile Jesus' harsh treatment of this woman with His total self-giving love by realizing that He is testing this woman, testing her faith in Him. Now, you might say that sounds awful, why would Jesus test this poor woman in such a harsh way. Bishop Robert Barron makes the point that the idea of God testing people, especially people who are dear to Him, is very Biblical. There are a number of examples in the Scriptures that prove this out. For example, Abraham is told to sacrifice his only beloved Son Isaac. Jacob lived in servitude to his uncle Laban for fourteen years. Jacob's son Joseph is thrown into a well by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt, where he spends seven years in prison. The classic story of God testing a person's faith in Him is the story of Job, the wealthy and faith-filled man who loses everything, his children, his property, and his health.

Why does God do this? Why does He seem to test the faith of those who are close to Him? If you are like me, I am thinking it may not be that great of an idea to be close to Him! I am not too sure that I want to go through that kind of a test. But I think this is another example

of a principle that works in our physical life working in the same way in our spiritual life. The idea is that we really don't grow if we are not tested. If a child begins to learn to read by reading very basic and simple books, and never attempts anything more challenging, they will stay at that same basic level. If a weight lifter continues to lift the same weight, and never tries to lift anything heavier, the muscles will not grow. If a coach or teacher finds a talented young athlete or student and never exposes them to more and more difficult challenges, that is not a very good coach or teacher, because that young person will never reach their true potential, and that would be a terrible shame.

There is really no reason to believe our spiritual lives should be any different. Maybe you feel like Jesus is ignoring you. Maybe you feel that He is absent or distant. Maybe you feel that He is unconcerned about you, and what is going on in your life. Maybe you feel like your prayer life is empty and dry. I want to encourage you to not give up, to continue to persevere in prayer, to continue to seek Him in humility, and to have faith that He is there, that He is listening. Even though it may not seem like it, He loves you desperately exactly where you are; it is just that He loves you way too much to want you to stay there.