

Prejudice Overcome

What is Truth? - 3

Matthew 15:21-28

Sermon

Hobart, August 24th, 2014

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Matthew 15:21-28

The Faith of a Gentile Woman

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²⁸ “Dear woman,” Jesus said to her, “your faith is great. Your request is granted.” And her daughter was instantly healed.¹

* Greek *Canaanite*.

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Mt 15:21-28). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

INTRODUCTION:

A. ONE OF THE HARDEST THINGS FOR MOST PEOPLE IS TO ADMIT WE ARE WRONG

1. It can dent our pride and make us feel dumb and humiliated
2. As we know from our own church experience, it can also make us feel threatened or disoriented
 - a) Especially if the issue is part of our basic belief system
3. We have all been brought up with a particular view of the world through which we make sense of life, the past, present and the future
 - a) It is very hard for us deep down when that worldview is threatened
4. But on the other hand, if what we believe is wrong, then we aren't facing or dealing with true reality
 - a) So admitting we are wrong, changing our thinking, our attitudes and our behaviour accordingly has to be a good thing
 - b) As Jesus told some of the Jews who were caught up in a wrong worldview, "the truth will set you free".²
 - c) Sadly they refused, clinging to the belief that they were the true children of Abraham, accusing him of being a devil and throwing stones at him.³

B. TODAY WE ARE GOING TO BE FURTHER EXPLORING THE QUESTION, HOW WE ARE CALLED TO KNOW AND LIVE THE TRUTH

1. We are going to look at the need to wrestle our way through some of our own inbuilt presumptions and attitudes that sometimes make it difficult for us to see the truth and act in a Godly way

² John 8:32

³ John 8:33-59

2. Our text today helps us to see how Jesus faced and wrestled through the presumptions and prejudices of his culture

C. PRAYER

BODY:

II. LIVING IN A WORLD OF PREJUDICE

A. JESUS LIVED IN A WORLD OF PREJUDICE

1. He lived in a religious society that had its mind firmly made up about who was right and wrong, and who was in and who was out
2. The religious people were controlling and narrow minded
3. And when confronted by Jesus with the truth about God and his way of life, they refused to hear or change
 - a) They just dug in their heels and came out fighting
4. Sometimes we do the same thing
 - a) We may at times be guided by our penchant for being right, and by our desire to avoid things and people we fear may taint us
 - b) And conversely we too often shut our hearts and minds to the often disruptive and challenging voice of God who wants us to know him, to know the truth, and be set free from wrong thinking and living

B. IN MATTHEW 15 JESUS HAS BEEN BATTLING WITH THE RELIGIOUS TEACHERS OF HIS DAY

Matthew 15:1-20

Some Pharisees and teachers of religious law now arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. They asked him, ²“Why do your disciples disobey our age-old tradition? For they ignore our tradition of ceremonial hand washing before they eat.”

³ Jesus replied, “And why do you, by your traditions, violate the direct commandments of God? ⁴ For instance, God says, ‘Honor your father and mother,’* and ‘Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.’* ⁵ But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, ‘Sorry, I can’t help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.’ ⁶ In this way, you say they don’t need to honor their parents.* And so you cancel the word of God for the sake of your own tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote,

⁸ ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

⁹ Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.’* ”

¹⁰ Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. “Listen,” he said, “and try to understand. ¹¹ It’s not what goes into your mouth that defiles you; you are defiled by the words that come out of your mouth.”

¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?”

¹³ Jesus replied, “Every plant not planted by my heavenly Father will be uprooted, ¹⁴ so ignore them. They are blind guides leading the blind, and if one blind person guides another, they will both fall into a ditch.”

C. HOW SHOCKED WOULD RELIGIOUS TEACHERS TODAY BE IF JESUS CONFRONTED THEM AND TOLD THEM THEY TEACH MAN-MADE IDEAS AS COMMANDS FROM GOD.’*

1. What if he told us the same thing about some of our ideas and prejudices?
2. Jesus boldly opposed those who outspokenly and prejudicially judged others and insisted on their own views that were contrary to the heart and mind of God
a) And he urges us to listen to him, and try to understand

* Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16.

* Exod 21:17 (Greek version); Lev 20:9 (Greek version).

* Greek *their father*; other manuscripts read *their father or their mother*.

* Isa 29:13 (Greek version).

* Isa 29:13 (Greek version).

Matthew 15:15-20

¹⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Explain to us the parable that says people aren’t defiled by what they eat.”

¹⁶ “Don’t you understand yet?” Jesus asked. ¹⁷ “Anything you eat passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer. ¹⁸ But the words you speak come from the heart—that’s what defiles you. ¹⁹ For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. ²⁰ These are what defile you. Eating with unwashed hands will never defile you.”

D. WHAT IS JESUS SAYING HERE?

1. Don’t get caught up in prescriptive rules about life, about outward religiosity
2. God is all about relationships, about love, not food, rules or rituals
 - a) About our hearts, our attitudes, our motives
 - b) He wants us to be loving, loyal, faithful, open, honest, humble, selfless, pure of heart
3. We learn this from God who is truth in himself, and from his life of love as Father, Son and Spirit
 - a) We learn this through the picture the entire Scriptures give us of our Triune God
 - b) And we see it most clearly in Jesus

E. WE NOW COME TO THE MAIN TEXT

1. One that often gets passed over
2. It gives us some things to think about regarding our attitudes towards life and other people that we have a built in prejudice against, because they have a different heritage, or a different way of looking at life than we believe to be proper

Matthew 15:21-28

The Faith of a Gentile Woman

²¹ Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

3. This was 50km and more from Galilee, on the coast, north of Israel

a) Jesus is taking a break, and getting right away from the problems and issues back in Israel because it was entering into the time leading up to his crucifixion

²² A Gentile* [Canaanite] woman who lived there came to him, pleading, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! For my daughter is possessed by a demon that torments her severely."

4. Somehow the Canaanite woman knew who Jesus was, and that he could heal her daughter

²³ But Jesus gave her no reply, not even a word.

5. Why would Jesus ignore her and her plea?

a) He doesn't even acknowledge her, "not even a word"
Matthew tells us

b) The disciples don't want anything to do with her

Then his disciples urged him to send her away. "Tell her to go away," they said. "She is bothering us with all her begging."

6. Again, we need to keep in mind why they have such a rejecting attitude

a) They were brought up to look down on non-Jews, especially Canaanites, and women

7. Jesus then gives a reason for not giving her any time or attention

²⁴ Then Jesus said to the woman, "I was sent only to help God's lost sheep—the people of Israel."

8. Why would Jesus say that?

a) Jesus' main mission was to the Jews, that was the place God had begun with his saving of all people, where he had been working and preparing for his Son to come into his creation

* Greek *Canaanite*.

b) But was it fair for Jesus to restrict himself only to the Jews?

(1) In Matthew 8 he had already healed a Centurion's daughter

²⁵ But she came and worshiped him, pleading again, "Lord, help me!"

²⁶ Jesus responded, "It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs."

9. This is the attitude and terminology the Jews of the time used towards Gentiles

a) Theologian F.W. Beare defines this as an "atrocious saying", conveying "incredible insolence".⁴

b) R.T. France adds, "So Jesus is expressing the contemptuous Jewish attitude to Gentiles in order to explain why her request does not fit into his mission to Israel."⁵

10. It is very convenient for us to have justifying reasons for rejecting or disdaining people we don't like

a) Jesus gives clear reasons to justify ignoring this Canaanite woman

b) But did these reasons really fit with the love and gracious mercy of God?

F. THIS IS A DIFFICULT TEXT

1. It seems that Jesus is going along with the Jewish notion that other people are inferior, unclean and not deserving of God's mercy and help

a) Isn't this discrimination and bigotry?

2. Jeanne Befano talks about this passage and raises some challenging thoughts for us to consider;

There are two things we can do with today's [text] ignore it ,, or wrestle with it like Jacob did the angel until God helps us to see how **even this is GOOD NEWS.**

⁴ Quoted in R.T. France, Matthew, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Matthew 15:26, InterVarsity Press, 1985, p. 247

⁵ R.T. France, Matthew, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Matthew 15:26, InterVarsity Press, 1985, p. 247

Things in Scripture aren't always what they seem. Sometimes we are called to wrestle with God until God speaks to us in these difficult texts.

One thing that's important is to recognize that Scripture is bigger than just the [immediate text]. So, it's important not to single out one text and think we know what it says in isolation. That's often what people who use Scripture to support their own way of thinking do, and they hold fast to every word as a means to support their own views of slavery, exclusion of women from the priesthood, or ragging on gay and lesbian relationships.

Things aren't always what they seem. Sometimes we are called to wrestle with God.

I wonder if that's what Jesus did....wrestle with God....in this story?

I wonder that because at first Jesus reacts to this begging, hysterical woman who was a foreigner in the same way his disciples do! He blurts out that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. Clearly she didn't fit the bill. Clearly she was the "other", the foreigner, the undeserving in the culture in which he lived.

The desperate woman kneels before him, begging, "Lord, help me!"

And then Jesus tells her that since he was sent for Israel's lost sheep, he couldn't even give her (and he likens her kind to a dog) a crumb of his time, his attention, his love, his mercy or his healing.⁶

²⁷ She replied, "That's true, Lord, but even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters' table."

3. What an amazing response from the Canaanite woman!

a) She recognizes Jesus' primary focus, but protests that he is not being fair and tells him why,

"even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters' table."

4. She is saying that his mission should still allow him to share some of the blessings with others without it effecting his primary mission and responsibility

⁶ Jeanne Befano, [PRCL-L] Canaanite Woman, Proper 15A/Ordinary 20A/Pentecost +10 Mat 15:21-28, Ps 67, August 17, 2014 Christ Lutheran, Washington DC, posting on Saturday, August 16, 2014 4:49 PM, To: PRCL-L@LISTSERV.LOUISVILLE.EDU

5. Jesus responds;

²⁸ “Dear woman,” Jesus said to her, “your faith is great. Your request is granted.” And her daughter was instantly healed.

6. Perhaps this was the outcome Jesus had in mind all along.

- a) Perhaps he was acting out the predictable Jewish response to see her reaction or to teach the disciples
- b) But it does seem on a more straight forward reading, that Jesus changes his mind in response to the truth of what she has said—to her faith in God

7. Jesus was fully human, and Hebrews tells us that he learned through the suffering human life he experienced.

Hebrews 5:8

⁸ Even though Jesus was God’s Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.

- a) Perhaps we see the Holy Spirit working with Jesus here
- b) Perhaps we see Jesus showing us how we need to be open to others, to listen to them, and be prepared to be changed as the Holy Spirit leads us closer to the heart and mind of God through such confronting experiences of life

8. Jeanne Befano discusses two ways of looking at this story;

There are at least two camps that Scripture scholars fall in here. One is that Jesus - who we profess is FULLY HUMAN - learned from her in this exchange, and it caused him to better grasp that he had not only been sent for Israel, but for all God’s children; even this foreigner.

The other is that Jesus knew what he was doing, but went through this script in order to teach his disciples. As they listened to the words coming from his mouth, maybe it would make them cringe a little. Maybe they would see how hollow they sounded.

We really do not know. But I tend to imagine this FULLY human, FULLY incarnate Man-God as having to learn some things just like the rest of us

humans. And who among us hasn't blurted something out loud only to wish we never had as soon as it left our mouths, because it sounded terribly inconsistent with who we know God calls us to be?

The woman calls him on it, pressing back. And as she wrestles with the God that is right in front of her, **for him**, things weren't always the way they seem either.

One of the things all of us, I'm sure every one of us here, have wrestled with this week was the suicide death of Robin Williams.

Robin Williams, the guy who had us laughing until our sides hurt over and over again as we watched some of his movies. The guy who could make us laugh, and minutes later, drive us into deep and serious and wonderful ways of thinking of the world.

Robin Williams was a clown. Robin Williams was the one who copied Patch Adam's clown nose and made children with serious illness laugh with delight on the big screen. Robin Williams was the one, we have learned, who lived with serious mental illness most of his adult life.

Things aren't what they seem.

They weren't what they seemed to the disciples in this Gospel story. They weren't what they seemed to Jesus who insulted the Canaanite woman and tried to get rid of her.

Her daughter suffered from demons; my daughter called it the beast. She talked about her illness ravaging her from the inside. But from the outside, Robin Williams, Dawn Befano and another 36,000 people this year aren't what they seemed to most of us.

But I have to say that neither is the person you pass by the street who is hungry or jobless or homeless. And neither are the clowns among us who make us laugh out loud but are so capable of carrying a like measure of darkness.

So here's where I see this [text's] ...GOOD NEWS.

When we see whole groups of people who aren't like us or don't believe what we do, when we want to push away, ignore, or want to walk on the other side of the street to ignore them, when we catch our inner critic judging others as jerks, learn from Jesus!

You see, it is human to critique others, to measure others even to think we are better than some folks. Actually, it is built into our survival mechanism in

order to help us run from Saber Tooth tigers. Even the disciples did. Even Jesus did. But what Jesus did next leaves us all seeing who God is in the end and it is always awesome to see.

God excludes no one. God's love extends not only to all people, but to all of Creation.

When we observe that inner critic judging another, let that be a sign to each of us that God is calling us to a wrestling match.

Instead of avoiding the other, get near to them. Learn from them what you carry around with you that might have you calling someone else a "dog". And then offer to love them, have compassion for them, and help carry their burdens.

It is then we will become Christ for them; it is then that they might see God in the demons that they wrestle with.⁷

G. THE ULTIMATE TRUTH IS GOD, AND GOD IS LOVE

1. Whether Jesus overcame a national prejudice or was just testing the woman or teaching his disciples,
 - a) What emerges in the end is faith
 - b) Faith in the truth of God, that he is all loving and wishes to rescue all people, and that we can rely on him
2. The woman, in spite of her limited understanding had a right heart
 - a) In spite of her not being a Jew, in spite of her being part of one of the most despised pagan cultures, a Canaanite, she was in tune with who God is, and the core of his being
 - b) Her motive was love for her daughter
3. As William Barclay describes her;

Heathen she might be, but in her heart there was that love for her child which is always the reflection of God's love for his children. It was love which made her accept his silence and yet still appeal; it was love which made her suffer the apparent rebuffs; it was love which made her able to see the compassion beyond and behind the words of Jesus. The driving force of this woman's

⁷ Jeanne Befano, Canaanite Woman , Proper 15A/Ordinary 20A/Pentecost +10 Mat 15:21-28, Ps 67, August 17, 2014 Christ Lutheran, Washington DC, posted in, PRCL-L@LISTSERV.LOUISVILLE.EDU

heart was love; and there is nothing stronger and nothing nearer God than that very thing.⁸

4. So she was in harmony with the truth “who” is God

H. AS A JEW, JESUS HAD TO OVERCOME THE PREJUDICES OF THE WORLDVIEW HE WAS RAISED WITH

1. He had to wrestle with what he had been taught

a) And he had to wrestle with his priorities

2. The Canaanite woman challenged that Jewish worldview

a) She pushed Jesus to go beyond his cultural comfort zone

b) She pushed him to sacrifice his time, and go the extra mile, beyond and outside his main priorities and mission

3. And because Jesus was in constant communion with his Father through the Holy Spirit

a) He saw the truth of her heart and acknowledged her faith

4. He changed his mind and healed her daughter

I. AS JESUS SHOWS US

1. We need to be prepared to listen to God

a) To keep in constant communion with the Father through the Spirit

2. We need to be prepared to listen to others

a) Including at times to those we think are ignorant, and who hold to a view of the world we presume to be wrong

3. Sometimes those we least expect, have important truths we have been blind to

4. So we need to be open to the truth, no matter where it comes from

a) This takes humility and wisdom

b) And most of all it takes being close to our God, so we can know the truth, and so the truth can set us free

⁸ William Barclay, Matthew 15:21-28, The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2 Chapters 11-28, rev. ed, 1975, p.123

c) So that our hearts and minds can be renewed and transformed to become more like God

5. As Elmer Colyer writes;

In light of God's self-revelation and self-communication through Jesus Christ and in the creative operation of the Holy Spirit, the human mind is renewed, transformed and spiritually reorganized, and it begins to reflect to a degree the triune God that we know in this way.⁹

⁹ Elmer Colyer, How to Read T.F. Torrance, Wipf & Stock/IVP, 2001, p.138

III. DISCUSSION:

A. WHAT ARE SOME STRONG BELIEFS WE HAVE CLUNG TO IN THE PAST THAT WE FOUND NOT TO CORRESPOND WITH REALITY?

1. How did you come to change your mind, to see the error in your thinking?

2. Was there a “sacrificial” aspect to any of these changes of belief?
 - a) How did it effect you emotionally?

 - b) Did you fear you would suffer from admitting you were wrong?

 - c) Did you suffer?

B. WHAT ARE SOME ISSUES THAT YOU FEEL NOW THAT YOU MAY NOT BE BEING COMPLETELY OBJECTIVE ABOUT?

1. What beliefs or issues do you think you could be less dogmatic and more open minded about?

2. What would be hard for you if you found out your thinking on these topics has been wrong?

CONCLUSION:

C. THE MORE WE WALK WITH GOD, THE MORE WE LISTEN TO HIM THROUGH HIS LIVING WORD AND HIS WRITTEN WORK.

1. Then the more we share in his life and become like him
2. It often means surrendering dearly held views, attitudes and habits
3. But as we have experienced, even though at first it can be scary and even humiliating to admit we are wrong, when we accept the truth of God and live by it—the truth really does set us and others free