

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹Jesus left that place and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²²There a Canaanite woman from that territory came and kept crying out, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!”

²³But he did not answer her a word.

His disciples came and pleaded, “Send her away, because she keeps crying out after us.”

²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

²⁵But she came and knelt in front of him, saying, “Lord, help me.”

²⁶He answered her, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to their little dogs.”

²⁷“Yes, Lord,” she said, “yet their little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

²⁸Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire.” And her daughter was healed at that very hour.

Outside-In

I.

Nearly every self-help book is built on the same premise: transformation starts on the inside and works its way out. You have to do some things, make some attitude adjustments, and then things will start to work out the way you were hoping and intending.

There’s a spiritual version of the same concept. Without anyone even preaching the concept it still creeps in; it’s the quiet assumption that our standing with God has to come from somewhere *inside* us. Some of you have been Lutherans your whole life. You are very sincere: you come to church or watch the livestream week after week. You know the hymns and the liturgy. You know the Bible stories. You know what you’re *supposed* to believe. Maybe you’ve been sitting in the same pew for decades: it almost has your name on it. There is just something inside us that has to qualify us.

Today’s Gospel takes that assumption and turns it outside-in.

“Jesus left that place and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon” (Matthew 15:21, EHV). The first thing Matthew wants us to note is that Jesus has deliberately left the Jewish heartland and crossed into Gentile territory.

“There a Canaanite woman from that territory came and kept crying out, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!’” (Matthew 15:22, EHV). Matthew doesn’t waste any words on the woman’s qualifications—she doesn’t have any. She is a Canaanite—a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. God had deliberately told his Old Testament people to drive the Canaanite people out of the land. She was not a part of the people of God’s Covenant. She had no claim on Jesus whatsoever. All she has is a problem: her daughter is possessed and is being tormented.

II.

“But he did not answer her a word” (Matthew 15:23, EHV). Silence. Nothing but silence from the very One the woman thought could be of some help. Not a word.

Is that what you expect from the One called the Messiah? Aren’t we more likely to think of him as he was in last week’s Gospel, pulling Peter up as he was sinking beneath the waves? Don’t we think of him more like the picture of the Shepherd carrying the lamb around his shoulders? Isn’t he supposed to be *compassionate*? He certainly doesn’t look it.

The Canaanite woman had said: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!” (Matthew 15:22, EHV). Somehow the woman knew exactly who Jesus is. But she was still outside the group—she was not a part of the Chosen people of Israel. Jesus’ silence seems to reinforce the idea that there is an “inside” group. As a specifically *Canaanite* woman, she is outside the group.

“His disciples came and pleaded, ‘Send her away, because she keeps crying out after us.’” (Matthew 15:23, EHV). Jesus’ silence confirmed it in the minds of the disciples: Jesus wasn’t really sent for the likes of her.

Then Jesus made that message quite clear: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24, EHV). Harsh. She has a legitimate problem with a demon-possessed daughter. Jesus seems to indicate that he didn’t come for such people—not if they’re on the outside.

The natural thing to do would be to try to qualify in some way. That’s the inside-out path. Somehow do something to get inside the circle.

“But she came and knelt in front of him, saying, ‘Lord, help me’” (Matthew 15:25, EHV). She’s tenacious, you have to give her that. She doesn’t give up easily. She just keeps begging.

“He answered her, ‘It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to their little dogs’” (Matthew 15:26, EHV). Wow! No matter how you might try to soften what Jesus says, it’s even more harsh than what he said before. This woman is outside. And that is where she is going to stay. She has nothing to offer. She’s not part of the covenant God had with his Chosen People. She has no pedigree or anything she could point to. There is no claim of her own whatsoever.

Jesus, of all people, seems to confirm it. Nothing on the inside means nothing at all. She’s finished.

So are we.

Do you ever search inside yourself for proof? You look for “enough” faith, or “enough” obedience, or “enough” of a track record in your past. But you just can’t find it. If grace runs inside-out—if it has to be generated from something inside us before God will notice—then none of us have any standing. We are just like the woman kneeling in the dust of a Gentile town.

Paul talked about “The wall of hostility that divided them” (Ephesians 2:14, EHV), that is, Jews and Gentiles. But the dividing wall isn’t really the wall between Jews and Gentiles, it’s the wall inside every sinful human heart. The wall that thinks we have to prove our faith, and *then* we’ll be invited inside.

III.

“‘Yes, Lord,’ she said” (Matthew 15:27, EHV). “Yes, Lord, I know. I know I’m not one of the children at the table.” She doesn’t try to claim a right she doesn’t have.

“Yet their little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (Matthew 15:27, EHV). It might have *sounded* as though Jesus firmly closed the door, but she finds mercy. She doesn’t try to convince Jesus that she belongs, she simply believes he is gracious. “Son of David,” she had called Jesus earlier. She knew of the promise of the Savior from somewhere in her past, and she knew he could help her if he chose. No demands, just waiting on the outside for the crumbs to fall.

Each of us needs to approach the Savior from the same position. We are outsiders by nature. In no way can we legitimately tell God he *owes* us something. There is no bribe we can make to convince God to give us what we want. Certainly we cannot say: “Look how good I’ve been, Lord.”

The Canaanite woman had nothing; nothing to put her on the inside. She knew she was outside. Faith admits we are on the outside, too, with nothing to offer. Faith knows who is on the inside: Jesus. If Jesus is there, even a crumb is enough.

IV.

“Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire’” (Matthew 15:28, EHV). Faith is not something that the individual can create. Faith comes from the outside. Faith is given.

God said in today’s First Reading: “My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples of the world. ⁸ ...I will gather still more people to my house besides the ones already gathered” (Isaiah 56:7-8, EHV). The Covenant God made with Israel seemed to exclude Gentiles. God didn’t say foreigners would somehow qualify for the inside. He promised through Isaiah that he would gather them—that he would bring them in.

Paul says this in the Second Reading: “But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he himself is our peace. He made the two groups one by destroying the wall of hostility that divided them” (Ephesians 2:13-14, EHV). The Ephesians were just like all other Gentiles—like you and me, and like the Canaanite woman. All of us seemed outside God’s promise.

Outside-in didn’t happen by God lowering his standards, or by pretending sin doesn’t matter. Outside-in wasn’t simply a declaration of God that everyone was an insider all along. God brought outsiders in by Jesus’ blood. His blood was shed, not just for the people of Israel, but for all people. He tore down the dividing wall of hostility. There wasn’t just a dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. There was a far greater dividing wall between human beings and God. You were dead in your sins. Grace came looking for you from the outside. Jesus saved you. Jesus paid for the sins of all.

In today’s Psalm, the psalmist wrote: “May the peoples praise you, O God. May the peoples praise you—all of them... ⁷God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him” (Psalm 67:3, 7, EHV). The nations gathered in, as Isaiah wrote, as the Psalmist sang, and as Paul announced, was *never* an afterthought to God’s plan. It *was* the plan. Grace, running outside-in, from the very beginning, until it reached a Canaanite woman on a dusty road, and until it reached you.

V.

So if you have been looking to self-help books, or looking inside yourself for the solution—stop. You won’t find proof there that you belong to God. But you don’t need to. Your righteousness doesn’t come from the inside. It was *given* to you—it was purchased by Jesus on the cross—and it’s already yours by faith.

Remember outside-in when you look at people still on the outside. Don’t look at the person who’s life is a mess and think they need to get things straightened out *before* they come to church. Don’t look at someone who is different and wonder whether they really belong. Remember, *we* didn’t belong, either. We were outside. Jesus brought us in.

Outside-in. Jesus brought us from outside to inside. Now, he sends us outside with the Gospel. There are still people outside who need to know that even the crumbs from Jesus are more than enough. Let them know. Outside-in is always by the blood of Jesus. Jesus died to bring outsiders in. Amen.