

Who does Jesus help?
Matthew 15:21-38

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Over the past several months, we have witnessed a flood of refugees trying to escape Middle East turmoil. Thousands upon thousands have made the journey by foot, train and boat in an attempt to leave behind war and instability. Some have travelled miles on foot to the point of exhaustion. Their numbers have swelled so dramatically that countries have been overwhelmed with the need. Some countries have put up fences. Some have seen tragedies unfold on the shorelines as boats crammed with refugees have sunk or capsized.

Yet some have succeeded in making their way to Europe. Yet upon arrival, they face more challenges. One of the greatest is the time required for processing and screening. Imagine you are one of the aid workers meeting these refugees. How would you decide who to help? Hundreds and thousands of people clamor for relief. They maybe crowd around your desk or stare at you from behind a refugee camp fence. They are in need but you have only so much capacity to help. You have only so much time – energy – and space for a certain amount of people according to your country's quotas. It must be an incredible strain on some of those workers who look into the countless faces of those in need.

But then imagine being one of those refugees. Some of you don't have to imagine. You have experienced it. I don't know what it's like to wait; to wonder if your name will be called; to agonize over whether your application will be processed or if the agent you draw will have a favorable attitude.

Now imagine you're a person in need looking at God. Do we see Him as a person with limited resources? We stand among a massive crowd wondering if He will hear us – if He will consider our request – if He will be in a favorable mood on the day we actually gain an audience with Him. We wonder if He will help us. We wonder if we have met the requirements for a favorable outcome. Who does God help? What is required of anyone who wants to come to Him with their needs?

These questions are raised by the passage we arrive at today. Who does Jesus help? He is going to be approached by someone way out of left field on his continuing journey. Through Jesus' surprising response, we will discover the answer to the question "Who does Jesus help?" But we will also add another answer to the question "Who is Jesus?" Who is the Jesus this passage reveals? Matthew drops clues for us through the passage. We are going to examine these to come up with another answer to the question of Jesus' identity. My prayer is that at the end of our time together, you will

understand more about the Lord and gain some great clarity about His willingness to help you in whatever you face today.

Matthew 15:21-38 (ESV)

²¹ And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ And he answered, “It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.^[e]

²⁹ Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. ³⁰ And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, ³¹ so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.

³² Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.” ³³ And the disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?” ³⁴ And Jesus said to

them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” ³⁵ And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, ³⁶ he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ³⁷ And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. ³⁸ Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children.

Who does Jesus help? 15:21-28

Jesus primary region for ministry has been in the Jewish populated areas of the Galilee – the North West region of Judea. But after the intense encounters with the Pharisees and the pressing needs of the crowds, Jesus withdraws with His disciples to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is found in modern day Lebanon just north of Israel. You can see it up and to the left of the Sea of Galilee. Gentiles populated this region. The term Gentile refers to anyone who is not a Jew. It is a term translated from the Hebrew goyim which means other nations or people. So this was almost like going to a different country. There was a different culture. The common language was most likely Greek. The people were a different race than the Jews to whom He had ministered.

Jesus does not go to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. He and his disciples go to rest and recharge after an intense time of ministry. Then Matthew tells us in verse 22, “A Canaanite woman from that region came

out.” This is the only time in the New Testament where the term “Canaanite” appears. Canaanites were the sworn enemies of Israel. They were the pagans targeted by God for Israel to displace when they conquered the Promised Land.

So this woman is both Canaanite and therefore a Gentile. The Gentiles were considered outsiders by the Jews who believed that the kingdom of heaven was for them and any Gentile converts to Judaism. Jews and Gentiles had a lot of racial tension between them. Jews consider themselves morally superior to gentiles. In fact, some Jews referred to Gentiles as dogs which was a derogatory reference to their uncleanness. Unlike today, dogs were not clean or domestic animals. They were wild scavengers who spent time in garbage dumps and dung heaps. There is evidence that some Gentiles were beginning to have little dogs as pets. But to Jews, dogs were unclean animals and served as a picture of an unclean person.

Remember the tradition of the elders that we talked about last week and ritual of washing before meals. Well, this tradition also had much to say about interaction with Gentiles. If you went into a Gentile home, the tradition said you were unclean for a day or something like that. If you know a little of the Easter story, you may remember that the Jewish religious leaders against Jesus would not come into Pilate’s palace on Good

Friday because they did not want to be ritually defiled for the Passover festival. Many Jews took this so seriously that they avoided even traveling through Gentile lands. So if you lived in Jerusalem and wanted north, you would take a longer route through Jewish territory just so you could avoid touching the soil contaminated by the Gentiles.

So this woman has 3 big strikes against her before she even opens her mouth. She is a Gentile – part of the unclean people. She is a Canaanite – one of the worst people groups in Jewish eyes and a sworn enemy of Israel. And she approaches Jesus when He is not on a ministry mission.

But she has a need and some unusual understanding for a Gentile. “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David, my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” She appeals to Jesus for mercy. She calls him Lord and Son of David. That was a phrase used by Jews of their anticipated Messiah. Somehow she is aware of this messianic expectation. She applies it to Jesus. Then she plainly states her need. “My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” Can you imagine your son or daughter oppressed by a demon? Her daughter experiences severe oppressions possibly to the point of not being able to function normally in society.

So how would you expect Jesus to respond? Anyone reading Matthew up to this point would expect an immediate, compassionate, attentive

response to this desperate plea from a mother. “But he did not answer her a word.” She continued to ask for mercy. Because notice in verse 22, she “was crying.” She didn’t cry out once and then walk away. She kept crying out for mercy. It was so persistent that the disciples had had enough. They begged Jesus to send her away because she kept at them.

Surely, Jesus will respond with compassion now. But he answers in verse 24, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” What does that mean? It seems like Jesus is saying he came only to save Jews. But how can that be? Didn’t God so love the world that He gave His only begotten son? Yet we must recognize that Jesus primary mission during his time on earth was to Israel. God’s plan would start with ministry to the Jewish people. After all, Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish Messiah. All the disciples were Jewish.

Only after the resurrection does God spread the message to the ends of the earth. That was not a change in plans. From the very beginning of God’s redemptive plan, God anticipated saving many from all nations. In Genesis 12:3, He declares to Abraham or Abram as he was known then, “through you all nations on the earth will be blessed.” But at this moment, that world wide mission had not yet started.

Jesus confirms that with his comment “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” Now we don’t know who he said this to. Did he say it to the woman or the disciples? The fact that the woman came to him in the next verse may indicate that he just said this to the disciples. If he did say this to the disciples, then why would he say it and not send her away? Why doesn’t he say “Yes, send her away because I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel?”

Maybe the disciples were about to clarify that. Maybe they were about to say “so we can send her away.” But the woman will not give up. She inserts herself directly into the situation and kneels before Jesus in an act of worship. “Lord, help me.” Well, despite all the timing question of when the mission to the Gentiles will actually begin, surely Jesus will help her now.

But he responds with one of the most disturbing statements he makes in all Scripture. If someone were to read this without taking a look at the big picture, they could conclude that Jesus was a racist who adopted the general views of his countrymen. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” At the most basic level, this means “it’s not right to take the promised kingdom of heaven for the Jews and throw it to Gentiles.” But he says it with much harsher language. It may have even been a common saying among Jews about Gentiles.

How could Jesus have made this statement? How does it square with what we know about Jesus from other parts of this Gospel and the overall picture painted by the Bible. Some argue that the word he uses for dogs is not the derogatory “dirty dog” term but “little dog” – a more affectionate term used of house pets among Gentiles. That could be one explanation where Jesus is kind of softening the harshness of this common saying. But I think the best explanation is that we have Jesus’ words but we don’t have his tone of voice or facial expression.

Think about how differently the same words could be interpreted with a changed tone or expression. So if Jesus was expressing the common superior judgmental Jewish attitude, it would sound something like this – (Disdainfully) – It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But what if Jesus had a smile on his face and an inviting expression so it sounded something like this – (Smiling, inviting) – You know it’s not supposed to be right to take children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

The woman’s response indicates that there was something inviting in his approach. She doesn’t let her shoulders sag and leave in dejection knowing she has no hope with this Jesus. She responds, “Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Maybe she was smiling too. Maybe she acknowledged that the mission of God was first

to Israel. But there was room for Gentiles to come into the kingdom in this first phase of ministry.

After all, Matthew has set us up for this. He’s the Gospel writer who drops in outsiders to the story all the way through. Remember the genealogy which began this Gospel? He inserts at least one Gentile woman into Jesus’ genealogy. Ruth was a Moabite – a non Jew who became David’s great grandmother. It is Matthew who includes the account of the Magi from the east – non Jewish wisemen who come and worship the Christ child. Matthew told us in chapter 8 of the centurion who comes to Jesus pleading for his daughter’s life. Jesus responds. So ministry to Gentiles, though not yet an official focus of God’s program, was already happening.

Jesus responds to this woman’s “crumbs from the table” comment with great praise. “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly. Here we discover the answer to the question “Who does Jesus help?” **Jesus helps anyone who comes to him in faith regardless of their background, past or heritage.**

Jesus responds to anyone who shows faith in Him – even the most unexpected person or the most despised people group. Jesus responds to the sincere faith of anyone who trusts in Him. So we must not conclude that

we're too far gone for Jesus to receive us. We must not conclude that the person with the hardest heart is beyond the care of God.

Yet why did Jesus put her through all this? Could it be that He was testing the sincerity and depth of her faith in him. Sometimes, people want to treat God like a divine Santa Claus. "God, I want this. Give it to me." They ask once and if God doesn't answer in the way they want, they're gone. They never really had faith or trusted in God. They just wanted to test if he was a slot machine that would provide them with their desires. Sometimes, God may not immediately answer our prayer requests to help us sift and refine them. If God gave us everything we asked for on an impulse, we would probably have a lot that we don't need or that would harm us or derail us from the good purposes He has for us.

This woman was a Gentile. She came from a culture that went to magicians in hopes of getting a miracle. Jesus didn't know her. He wanted to ensure that he was dealing with someone who actually had faith in him. Through this series of statements and questions, her faith in Him becomes clear.

Yet we do need to be careful because asking for the healing of a child is a lot different than asking for a luxury yacht or 5 million dollars in spending money. We can err on the side that we asked for healing but we didn't

receive because we didn't have enough faith or we didn't ask in the right way. Things are a lot more complex than that. God can have different purposes for why He says yes or no or wait for requests of healing and help. Sometimes God's timing is not our timing. Sometimes God wants to accomplish something very different by not healing in the way we want. Sometimes God calls us to a life of faith, trust and strengthening through some trial or illness.

But we also need to be careful the other way where we never come to God in faith. We never ask for anything beyond what we can figure out because we fear disappointment or we don't really believe that God can do something. The woman came to Jesus with her need. Jesus chose to meet that need as requested. But he could have also poured strength in her life to bear with and persevere with her daughter. He could have given her some new perspective that would enable her to continue on. He ultimately knows what needs to happen.

We need to constantly come to him in faith to receive from Him in our time of need. **Faith is the conduit (pipe, river, stream, channel) through which God pours his saving and healing into our lives.** We acknowledge our need – we admit our lack of resources – we admit our poverty in spirit – we recognize our need for a fresh touch from Him – we come with parched

spirits needing refreshment – we cry out in frustration over God’s apparent lack of concern over some unjust situation – through these prayers and faith in Him, God responds to our needs.

Jesus responds to anyone who comes to him in faith – regardless of background, past or heritage. If you have never come to Jesus because of some factor in your background or past or heritage that you think is impossible to overcome, look at this woman. She had 3 strikes against her before she even asked. Yet she wasn’t out. Jesus responded immediately to her need.

So we’ve received an answer to the question “who does Jesus help?” But what about the question “who is Jesus?” What is Matthew trying to emphasize about Jesus through this passage? There are three clues I could find.

The first clue was found in this passage. **Clue #1 – 15:21-22 – Tyre, Sidon, Canaanite.** Matthew draws our attention to a Gentile region and people. The second clue is found in verses 29-31. Jesus goes on from there and walks by the Sea of Galilee. So we can immediately conclude that he has gone back to a Jewish region. But in the parallel passage that tells this story in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 7:31 we read “Then he returned from the region of Tyre and Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the region of the

Decapolis.” What’s the Decapolis? The term literally means 10 cities. It was the region east of the Sea of Galilee populated by Gentiles.

But Matthew doesn’t reveal that Jesus goes to a Gentile region by naming Decapolis. Jesus goes up onto a mountain. Great crowds come to him bringing the lame, blind, crippled and mute. He heals and the crowd is amazed. **Then Clue #2 – 15:31 Clue 2 – (Verse 31) – And they glorified the God of Israel.** Now if it the crowd was made of Israelites, they would glorify God. There were no other gods to the true Israelite. But this crowd glorifies the God of Israel, most likely indicating that they are not Israelites but Gentiles.

The last clue is found in verses 32-39. Here we come to what’s called the feeding of the 4000. Now some people have had problems with this passage because we just came through the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 14. There are a lot of similarities between these stories. Both have massive crowds. Both have hungry people. Both have the disciples discovering meager rations. Both have Jesus giving thanks and multiplying the little lunch to feed the multitude. Both conclude with the disciples gathering up basketfuls of leftovers.

So critics argue that Matthew was just filling space here with a revised account of the feeding of the 5000. He just changed a few of the numbers –

5000 to 4000 and 12 baskets to 7 baskets. He did this to try to paint a more impressive figure of Jesus.

But though the accounts have those similarities, there are quite a few meaningful differences. In the feeding of the 4000, Jesus initiates the discussion about the crowd's need – not the disciples. In the feeding of the 5000, the crowd was with Jesus one day. Here the crowd was with him 3 days. In the feeding of the 5000, the crowd sat down on grass. Here they sit on the ground perhaps indicating it is later in the summer after the heat has dried up all the grass.

But perhaps the biggest clue about the difference between these accounts and the significance of the feeding of the 4000 comes in verse 37. Unfortunately, our English translations do not highlight the slight yet perhaps greatly significant difference. In the feeding of the 5000, Matthew 14:20 states “And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces left over.” In the feeding of the 4000, Matthew 15:37 says “and they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over.” Yes the numbers are different. But in Greek, the term for baskets is different. The baskets in the feeding of the 5000 were wicker baskets typically associated with Jews. The baskets in the feeding of the 4000 were much larger basket or hampers typically associated with the Gentiles. In fact the same word for basket found in the

feeding of the 4000 is found in Acts 9:25 when Paul is lowered from the Damascus wall, a Gentile city, in a basket, big enough to hold a man. **Clue #3 – 15:37- 7 Baskets commonly used by Gentiles.**

These three clues give us the next answer to the question “Who is Jesus?” **Jesus is the healer and provider for Gentiles.** One commentator notes that Matthew may be building toward this revelation through this passage. It starts with Jesus providing crumbs from the table for one woman. Then he heals many Gentile people in a crowd. Then he provides an over abundance of bread for a massive crowd of Gentiles. From crumbs to comprehensive healing to many left overs. Jesus provides for the Gentiles just as He does for the Jews.

This is tremendous news for you and me because I think most everyone in this room is a Gentile. If Jesus didn't expand this mission beyond the Jews, none of us would be here today. Yet here we are beneficiaries of what started out as crumbs for our ancestors.

So who does Jesus help? Anyone who comes to him in faith regardless of background. Jesus is the healer and provider for anyone who comes to him. What is your need today? What is beyond your resources? What do you need to bring in faith to the Lord, Son of David, provider and healer for Gentiles?