

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 15:21 - 15:28



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the story of the woman with the demon-possessed daughter from Matthew 15:21-28. He explains that although Judaism was ordained by God, the externalism and traditionalism of the Pharisees gave many people a negative impression of it. Jesus initially ignored the woman, as he had not yet fully rejected Israel, but ultimately healed her daughter due to her faith. Gregg highlights the lesson of how Gentiles can obtain blessings through their faith, even when the Jews neglect them.

### Transcript

We're turning today to Matthew chapter 15, beginning at verse 21. But he answered and said, But he answered and said, And she said, And Jesus answered and said to her, And her daughter was healed from that very hour. Now, what's going on here? Jesus' behavior on this occasion has bothered readers, even Christians sometimes, because it seems like Jesus was not very caring, not very polite to this woman.

Here's a woman who's greatly grieved because her daughter is demon-possessed. Her daughter is tormented by an evil spirit. We don't know how old her daughter is.

We don't know how old her daughter was, and we don't know exactly what form this torment took. But we know of other cases recorded in Scripture where children were demon-possessed, and the demons would throw them into convulsions, probably not very unlike grand mal epileptic seizures. And in some cases, the demons would specifically direct them to fall into fire or into water, attempting to destroy them.

In the Bible, when people are demon-possessed, it is generally not the case that we have a description of their moral behavior. Sometimes we think of demon possession as being probably most likely to exist in people who are very immoral. And, I don't know, that may be true, although the Bible indicates that we don't need demons in us to make us immoral.

We have our flesh, and we are inclined toward immorality and to misbehavior and sin by our very nature of our flesh. It may be that demons could encourage us along those same lines, but many people go quite a distance into the realm of destroying their lives

in sin without any demons inside. When we read in the Bible of people who are demon-possessed, it is not their moral behavior that is focused upon.

We're not even sure that they had any problems with their moral behavior, particularly. People with demon possession were tormented. The demons were not there to inspire them to go out and have a good time.

The demons were there to make them miserable. And the demons would sometimes afflict people with physical sicknesses. We read in the Bible of a woman who had a spirit of infirmity so that she couldn't stand up straight for many years.

We read of people who had deaf and dumb demons that inhibited their powers of speech and hearing. There are people who seem to behave in an insane way. The man who lived among the tombs, of course, is a good example of that.

How he cut himself with rocks and lived naked in the tombs, isolated, like a wild animal. He had gone nuts. Now, we don't know what this girl, this daughter of this Syrophenician woman, or here she's called a woman of Canaan, another parallel in one of the other Gospels calls her a woman of Syrophenicia.

We don't know what symptoms her daughter had, but she says that her daughter is severely tormented by demons. We're not restricted only to the biblical accounts to know what demons do, because demon possession is a phenomenon that's still with us. And there are many reports from the mission fields especially, and even from domestic experiences here in America of demon possession.

I've encountered it on occasion before, and I've read a great deal from missionaries from Africa and India and other third world countries where they encounter demons and the torment that people experience from demons can be very horrible. It can be worse than being in an abusive situation with people abusing you physically and so forth. Demon possession can take the form of physical abuse, even sexual abuse, judging from some of the stories that come to us from missionary lands.

Anyway, we don't know exactly what form the torment was of this daughter, but the mother was at her wit's end. There was obviously nothing that her religion, and she was a Gentile by the way, this is very important to the story, she was a Gentile woman, she was not a Jew. There was nothing that her religion offered in terms of liberty for her daughter.

Her daughter was just stuck with this problem. However, the woman had heard about Jesus. Now she had never converted to Judaism herself.

She must have been unimpressed with Judaism as a religion, and well she might have been. Not so much that there was anything wrong with Judaism itself, God had ordained Judaism, but the hypocritical externalism and traditionalism of the Pharisees no doubt

would have given lots of people a negative impression of Judaism because they would have judged it by what they saw in the Pharisees. Now we know that this woman was not a convert to Judaism.

It comes up in the story. If she was a convert to Judaism, she would have been a proselyte, and she would have therefore been of the lost sheep of Israel to whom Jesus was sent. But she is a Gentile of a Gentile religion, and she no doubt was aware of Judaism since she lived in a neighboring country, Tyre and Sidon where Jesus was, was just the next region north of Israel in Phoenicia, the next country north of Israel.

And so she would be very much acquainted with Jews and their religion, but she obviously was not impressed with it enough to join the religion. But when she heard of Jesus and his miracles, she was impressed with him. And she came to him and said, Lord, you've got to help my daughter.

I'm in big trouble. Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David. Now in calling him Son of David, it's rather interesting because Son of David was a Messianic title.

That is, it was a name for the Messiah. Now she was a Gentile. She was not one of the people looking for the Messiah.

The Jews were looking for the Messiah, not the Gentiles. And yet she had heard enough about Jesus, and she knew enough about Judaism to know that the Jews anticipated a Messiah, and she recognized that Jesus was the guy. He was the Son of David.

He was the Messiah that was anticipated. Now here's a Gentile woman who recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, even though many of his own fellow Jews did not recognize him as that. And in that, she stood out as one who had more spiritual perception than most of Jesus' own countrymen.

But he didn't initially answer her. It says in verse 23, he answered her not a word. Now this seems rude, because as we read the next statement, it's clear the woman kept following and asking for help.

The disciples came and urged Jesus saying, send her away for she's crying out after us. So we have to picture that Jesus is walking down the road with his disciples. This Gentile woman comes out and asks for help, and he just doesn't even pay attention to her, doesn't even speak to her, doesn't look at her.

He just keeps on walking. But she doesn't give up. She pursues him, and she's crying out to him, sufficiently to annoy the disciples.

And they say, listen, Lord, at least send her away. Don't ignore her. You know, I mean, if you're going to ignore her, she's just going to keep bugging us.

If you're not going to help her, then tell her to go away, would you? But Jesus answered and said, I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Now what does this have to do with anything? Well, it explains Jesus' behavior. It explains why he was not addressing her problem.

He was ignoring her. He, at that point in time, had not a ministry to the Gentiles, generally. Now we know from the prophets, and we know from later New Testament information, that Jesus was the Savior not only of the Jews, but also of the Gentiles.

The prophets predicted that this would be so, and of course, history has shown it to be so. And ever since the time of Christ, there are far more Gentiles who have been received into the kingdom of God than there are Jews who have been. But in the days of Jesus, he had an obligation to reach the covenant people of God first.

Many times in the scripture, we're told that the gospel is offered to the Jew first, and then also to the Greek. And the reason for that is that God had a prior relationship with Israel. He did not have a prior relationship with the Gentiles.

God had a covenant relationship with Israel, and the prophets had said that the Messiah would make a new covenant with the house of Israel. As it turned out, of course, most of the house of Israel eventually rejected the Messiah, and only a remnant of them became the Israel with whom the new covenant was made. Now, at this point in time, Jesus was not yet sent to go out to anyone other than the Jews.

He did not have an outreach to the Gentiles going on. And this woman was a Gentile. And therefore, she was out of the range of his outreach at this particular time.

In fact, he spoke as if it wouldn't even be appropriate for him to deal with her situation, because he has not been sent for that. Remember, Jesus didn't do things on his own prerogative. He did what he was sent to do.

He did the will of his father. He said to his disciples, you know, the father hasn't sent me to do anything with the Gentiles right now. I have not been sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

God has Israelite sheep that are lost, and I'm out to seek them. And I'm not to be distracted by going off to the Gentiles. Back in Matthew chapter 10, Jesus sent out the 70 disciples on a short-term mission.

He said, don't go into any of the cities of the Gentiles. Go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And that means that at that time during his ministry, he was not, and he did not want his disciples to be, distracted by the needs of the Gentiles at that time.

There was a prior commitment he had to Israel, that he needed to go to them first. Now, when the Israelites rejected him as a class, then of course he turned his attention much

more to the Gentiles. But this was not at that time.

He had not yet been fully rejected by Israel. There were still thousands of Jews who were following Christ, and he was reaching out to more. Now, it says, then the woman came and worshipped Jesus, saying, Lord, help me.

Now, for the first time, Jesus actually speaks to her. He answered and said, it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. Now, what an interesting thing to say.

And how was that to be understood? It's clear that she had no trouble understanding his meaning, because she said, true Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table. And he recognized that as a very perceptive comment. And he said to her, oh woman, great is your faith.

Let it be to you as you desire. Now, what is this exchange about dogs and food and crumbs and so forth about? Well, the Gentiles were regarded as dogs in the minds of the Jews. Dogs were one of the animals that Moses forbade Israel to eat.

They were unclean animals, unlike cows and sheep and so forth. Dogs were an unclean thing. Now, there were dogs in the home.

No doubt, they were dogs that just scavenged food out of the streets and under the tables and so forth. Some of them were pets. They were not very highly regarded animals, though.

Not like today, where we consider dogs to be man's best friend. I mean, a dog, we can still use the word dog as a criticism, if we say someone is a dog. But the fact of the matter is, some people really love dogs and are quite affectionate toward dogs.

That wasn't the way the Jews felt about them. Dogs may have been a necessary evil to have around, too. You know, like garbage collectors, sort of like sharks in the ocean.

They just eat all the garbage. And the dogs did that in the streets and in the homes. They helped clean things up.

And perhaps they were somewhat useful in warding off intruders or whatever, just like they are today. The point is, though, that the term dog, when applied to a person, was meant to be a pejorative. The Jewish people, the men, looked down on certain other classes of people.

Quite low. Gentiles were among the lowest. They actually looked down on women, pretty much, too.

The men were quite chauvinistic in Israel. And from what I'm told, Jewish men, the Pharisees, used to pray every day, Oh God, I thank you that I was not created a Gentile

or a woman or a dog. And when it came to Gentiles, the Jews thought of Gentiles as subhuman and unclean.

And they called them dogs. Because dogs are subhuman and they're unclean animals. It was obviously a statement of contempt, a term of disgust toward Gentiles.

Now, Jesus was being approached by one of these Gentiles, whom the Jews regarded as dogs. And surprisingly, he referred to her as a dog. He said, you know, it's not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

Now, what he's saying is this. He's already said that he was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Changing the metaphor from sheep to children.

Israel, the people of Israel, were the children of God's household. Gentiles were around, too. And God was not totally oblivious to them.

But they are more like the dogs of his household. He had no covenant relationship with the Gentiles. He had no commitments to them.

He had made an agreement with the Jews that he would bless them if they followed his ways and be in a covenant relationship with them. He had no disagreement with the Gentiles. They were more like dogs in his household.

And the Jews were like his children. And Jesus said, for me to take that food, which rightly should be given to the children, and take it from the children and give it to the dogs, would be quite wrong to do. Now, what he seems to be saying is this.

The ministry I have is to God's children, the people of Israel, the lost sheep of Israel. I am focused on that. I am feeding them with the food that the Father has sent me to give them.

You are a Gentile. For me to take time away and effort away from feeding God's children and to feed you, who are more like a dog than a child in the house of God, would be an inappropriate thing, just like you would never take the food from your table and throw it to your dogs rather than give it to your children. Now, the woman, of course, could have been very put off by this because Jesus perpetuated the idea that the Gentiles were dogs.

Now, we might say, well, the Jews, you know, they were chauvinistic. They were racist. They looked down on the Gentiles as dogs.

But, of course, God wouldn't share their perspective. But Jesus acted as if he did. The Gentiles were dogs.

Unfortunately, so are the Jews. Anyone who rebels against God is a dog. And Gentiles, in general, worshiped idols.

The Jews did not worship idols outwardly, but many of them were no better than Gentiles in their own hearts. Their hearts were as corrupt as the Gentiles in many cases. And Paul brings that out in Philippians chapter 3, where he says in Philippians 3, 2, Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation.

Now, in the context, the dogs he speaks of here are not canines. The dogs are the Jewish people who are trying to force Gentile Christians to be circumcised. Those are the people that Paul was in conflict with here.

And it's interesting because the Jews considered Gentiles to be dogs. Paul referred to the Jews who were trying to make the Gentiles be circumcised. He referred to them as dogs.

Beware of dogs. The point is, all people are unclean. Dogs were an unclean animal, and all people are sinners.

For Jesus to say Gentiles are dogs would be quite correct. For him to say that Jews were dogs, in most cases, would be correct too, because although the Jews had the law, most of them rejected it, and were living, as Jesus said, by their traditions, rather than obeying God and having a relationship with Him. Many of them were hypocrites.

People who are not committed to God are dogs. That is, they are unclean, and they are unworthy of God's blessing and God's special favors. Now, what's interesting here is the woman was not put off by this.

She agreed. She says, that's true, Lord. In other words, she's saying, Lord, you're saying I'm a dog, and that I don't have any right to have you serve my needs, and you are right, Lord, in saying that.

However, you can feed your children and still have some crumbs left over for the dogs. It's not as if you need to stop feeding your children. You have such an abundance of food to offer, that you can give the children all that they will take, and there will be still some crumbs left over for the dogs.

And by that she means, she recognized that Jesus had power to spare. He could meet all the needs of the children of Israel, and still have enough left over to help her, a humble, unclean, Gentile dog who had need. And Jesus appreciated that.

Jesus recognized that she not only was humble, and that she was willing to accept the fact that she was unworthy, but she also knew that Jesus' grace was so great, and His power so unlimited, that He could throw a few crumbs to her. He could heal her daughter without in any way taking away from what He had to offer to the children of Israel. And He marveled at her faith.

Now her faith was manifested in a variety of ways. One, when she first cried out for help and Jesus ignored her, she didn't give up. She pursued Him.

She kept asking. And it's interesting because Jesus ignoring her did not reflect an unwillingness to help her. He obviously waited to see if she would have the faith and the persistence to come and pursue and lay hold on that blessing, and not be satisfied until Jesus had helped her daughter.

I wonder if many of us have had our children, or some other persons of concern to us that we've prayed for, go unhelped because God seemed to ignore our prayers initially, but was only waiting for us to persevere. Jesus waited for this woman's faith to be manifested by her perseverance, her humility, and by her recognition of Him as one who had more than enough to meet the needs of the Jews and of the Gentiles. It would be like the Gentiles merely taking crumbs that were left over from the children's food.

And Jesus recognized her faith as very great. You remember Jesus recognized another Gentile's faith as very great on another occasion in Matthew 8, a centurion who had a sick servant, and he asked Jesus to heal his servant. And the man said he knew that Jesus could just give the word to his son, and Jesus marveled and said, I've never seen this kind of faith, not in all Israel.

You see, even though Jesus was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, His real blessings go to those who have faith. If Israel had faith, wonderful. If they did not, then they would not have the blessings.

If the Gentiles had faith, they could press in to obtain the blessing that the Jews neglected. In fact, in mentioning the dogs can have the crumbs that fall from the master's table, she may have even been implying a little bit that the children sometimes throw food down to the dogs. Sometimes the children don't like the food, and they hand it to the dogs under the table.

And the children reject the food. Certainly the dogs have the right to take the food that the children won't eat. And her statement might have even implied that.

She might have been noticing that Jesus was not being really fully received. And what he had to offer was not being fully embraced by the Jews. But she would be glad to have it.

What children won't eat, the dogs almost always will be glad to take. They're not so picky. And she could be saying, you know, Jesus, these Jews that you're sent to, they're not really taking what you're serving them.

But I'll take it. I may be a dog, but I'm not so picky. I'll gladly receive what you have for me.

I'll gladly accept by faith the blessing that I need from you. And Jesus marveled at her faith. And it tells us that her daughter was healed from that very hour.

I believe that it's in Mark, if I'm not mistaken, has the parallel story where it tells how she



went home and she found her daughter healed and normal and the demon was gone. And how her life and her daughter's life were changed because this woman persevered. When Jesus didn't seem to be interested in helping her, but she persevered and he really was interested.

He marveled at her faith and he honored her faith. Many things can be obtained through faith, but sometimes we have to persevere through times when God doesn't seem to be answering.