

# Matthew 15.21-28

- Great Faith! -

**Author: Evert Jan Hempenius**

© 2020

[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)

For any questions about this Scripture passage or the notes, please contact us through the Contact Us tab on the website.

## Introduction

- ❖ Great Faith!
- ❖ When a gentile woman came to Jesus and cried for help, the reaction of Jesus has puzzled many readers:
  - At first, he didn't answer a word.
  - Then he says: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."
  - And finally: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."
  - Exemplary is the following conclusion: "Jesus, although he has not really changed his mind about anything—his mission is still only to the lost sheep of Israel, and the priority of Israel in salvation-history remains uncontested—finally gives in to the woman."<sup>1</sup> This because of her great faith.
- ❖ This outline will argue that the silencing of Jesus was primarily meant to reveal the faith of the disciples, their impatience and irritation, and secondly, the faith of the woman.
  - Then the "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" was not directed towards the woman, but to the disciples. The outline will argue that this utterance didn't mean a refusal to help the woman, but was used by Jesus to distance himself from the unmerciful disciples. They wanted to get rid of her. To understand this move, it is necessary to take the location where all this happened into account.

---

<sup>1</sup> Davies, W. D., & Allison, D. C., Jr. (2004, p. 556).

- Finally, the third utterance seems to be a third refusal, this time directed towards the woman, who has knelt before Jesus. The question is, whether “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs” is about the Israel (children) and the heathen (dogs) and the bread (the blessings of the Kingdom of God), or just a saying, which was familiar to the Canaanite woman. If it was just a saying, then it was not meant as an insult and refusal but as an invitation to show her faith.
- ❖ Finally, it is interesting to note that Matthew describes two times “great faith” (Mt 8:10; 15:28). In both cases, non-Israelites are involved!
- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Gospel of Matthew. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand-alone”. You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

## Context

Matthew 13:53-16:20 – moving around	
13:53-58	Location: Nazareth – resistance – little faith
14:1-12	The death of John the Baptist
14:13-21	Location: A solitary place – the feeding of the five thousand
14:22-33	Location: The Lake – Jesus walks on the water – little faith
14:34-15:20	Location: The land of Gennesaret – dispute with the Pharisees – resistance
15:21-28	Location: The region of Tyre and Sidon – the Canaanite woman – great faith
15:29-38	Location: the sea of Galilee – the feeding of the four thousand
15:39-16:4	Location: the vicinity of Magadan <sup>2</sup> – dispute with the Pharisees
16:5-12	Location: across the lake – discussion with the disciples – little faith
16:13-20	Location: the region of Caesarea Philippi – Peter’s confession of the Christ

<sup>2</sup> Place of uncertain location on Lake Gennesaret. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 608).

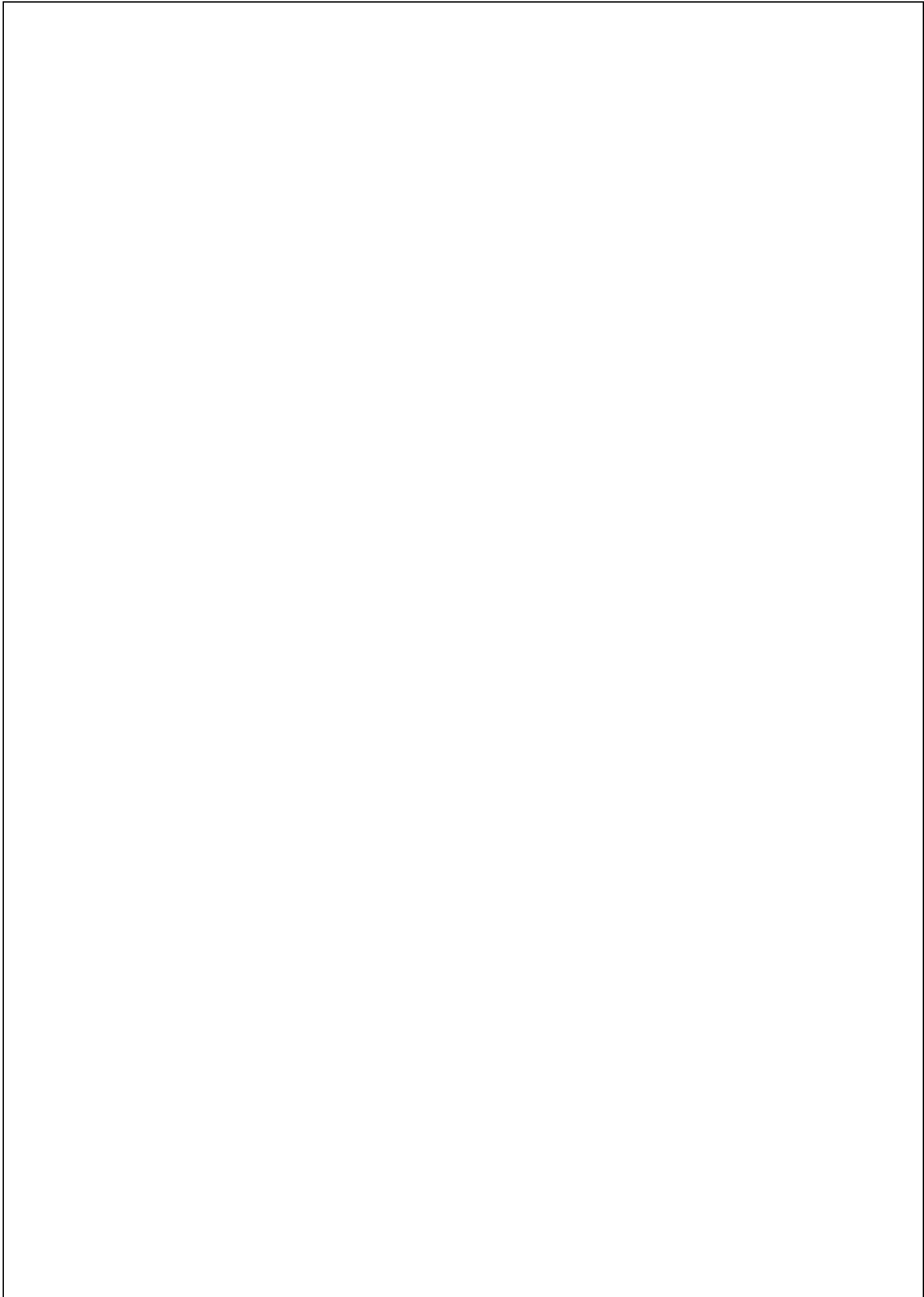
❖ The context reveals the following:

- Jesus is moving around quite a lot. Matthew mentions the different locations. Seven are found in Galilee: Nazareth, the lake and sea, a solitary place, the land of Gennesaret and the vicinity of Magadan. Two locations are across the border: the regions of Tyre and Ceasarea Philippi. See the map.
- There is resistance and there are disputes with the Pharisees. Hostility is growing.
- There are four comments on little faith and great faith of the Canaanite woman, which is remarkable.



— Matthew 13:53-16:20 Sites mentioned

- ❖ This map shows the sites visited by Jesus. Twice he wanders north of Galilee: Matthew 15:21-28 (the region of Tyre and Sidon) and Matthew 16:13-20 (Caesarea Philippi). The location of Magadan is not certain.



## Form and structure

- ❖ This is a short narrative with three scenes.:

Jesus and the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28)	
<i>Background</i>	<sup>21</sup> Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.
<i>Scene 1 (verse 22)</i> <i>The Canaanite woman</i>	<sup>22</sup> A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.”
<i>Scene 2 (verse 23, 24)</i> <i>Jesus and the disciples</i>	<sup>23</sup> Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”  <sup>24</sup> He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”
<i>Scene 3 (verse 25-28)</i> <i>Jesus and the Canaanite woman (disciples present)</i>	<sup>25</sup> The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.  <sup>26</sup> He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” She said, <sup>27</sup> “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”  <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”  And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

- ❖ This short story consists of four parts.

- Verse 21 provides the background, connecting this story with the preceding part and providing necessary geographical information.
- Verse 22 focusses on the Canaanite woman. She is shouting from some distance.
- Verse 23, 24 focusses on the disciples and Jesus. The Canaanite woman is still at some distance.
- Verse 25-28 focusses on Jesus and the woman, while the disciples are present.

## Technical, hermeneutical and historical notes

- ❖ The reaction of Jesus to the outcries of the Canaanite woman raises many questions.
  - Why is he ignoring her initially?
  - What is the use of the comparison with the dogs?
  - How does the argument that Jesus was only sent to lost sheep of Israel fit in the story?
- ❖ To solve these questions, I will propose some alternative narratives. See below. Of course these alternative narratives are hypothetical but they might shed some light on the discourse between Jesus and the disciples, and between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. See below.

## Exposition

### Verse 21 (setting)

- ❖ **“Leaving that place.”** This place is probably Gennesaret (Mt 14:34), where Jesus healed many people. When Pharisees from Jerusalem came (Mt 15:1), they felt offended by Jesus when he called them “hypocrites” (Mt 15:7). There are increasing tensions between the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus. See below Matthew 12:14, 15.
- ❖ Jesus **“withdrew”** = **“ἀναχωρέω”**: b. *withdraw, retire, take refuge*.<sup>3</sup> See also Matthew 2:12-14, 4:12. Matthew 12:14, 15:
  - **“But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.** Aware of this, Jesus **withdrew** from that place.”
  - After the burial of the body of John the Baptist, who had been beheaded, Jesus **“withdrew** by boat privately to a solitary place.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 75).

- ❖ **“the region of Tyre and Sidon.”** See the map. This region didn’t fall under the jurisdiction of Herod. There were some Jews living there.
  - People from this region had been coming to see and listen to Jesus (Mk 3:8 and Lk 6:17).
- ❖ This short introductory verse explains why there are no crowds following Jesus. Given the fact that they were the region of Tyre and Sidon, the reply of Jesus to his disciples about “the lost sheep of Israel” seems to be out of context.

Verse 22 (scene 1)

- ❖ There is an attention marker, often translated with “behold” or “look.”
- ❖ **“A Canaanite woman”.** Mark refers to her as being “Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia” (Mk 7:26).
  - Matthew might use “Canaanite” **for the purpose of contrast: Canaanite <> Israelite.**
- ❖ **“crying out” = “κράζω”:** 2. **to communicate something in a loud voice, call, call out, cry.**<sup>4</sup> Other versions have **“κραυγάζω”:** **to utter a loud sound, ordinarily of harsh texture, cry (out), cry for help, scream.**<sup>5</sup>
  - The woman was **constantly** crying for help (imperfect, durative). She must have been desperate because her daughter was suffering terribly. This cry showed her love for her child.
  - She is following Jesus and the disciples (“after us”; 15:23).<sup>6</sup>
- ❖ **“Lord, Son of David”.** See also Matthew 9:27; 17:15; 20: 30, 31.
  - It is noteworthy that this woman used a Jewish messianic title. It might indicate that she has heard of Jesus. She even recognized Jesus.
- ❖ **“have mercy on me!” = “ἐλέεω”:** **to be greatly concerned about someone in need, have compassion/mercy/pity, help someone (out of compassion).**<sup>7</sup>
  - See also Matthew 9:27; 17:15; 20:30, 31.
  - This mercy is one of the signs of the coming Kingdom of God.
- ❖ **“suffering terribly from demon-possession”.** This has been going on for some time.

---

<sup>4</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 563).

<sup>5</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 565).

<sup>6</sup> Newman, B. M., & Stine, P. C. (1992, p. 495-496).

<sup>7</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 315).

- It is not possible to describe the character of this demon-possession.

Verse 23, 24 (scene 2)

❖ **“Jesus did not answer a word.”**

- This reaction feels awkward. By not answering the cries of the woman, Jesus is revealing the thoughts and faith of his disciples and of the woman:
  - The disciples became irritated.
  - The woman didn’t give up, she persevered in her cries.
- John described (Jn 8:1-11) how Jesus took some time before answering the Pharisees. By being silent, he was pressing them to do some introspection.

❖ **“So his disciples came to him and urged him.”** The woman is crying for help and Jesus still doesn’t respond to her cries. The disciples want to stop this crying. Are they annoyed?

- **“urged”** (imperfect). The disciples didn’t ask him once but continued to ask him.

❖ **“Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”** This is a strong request, cast in the form of a command.

- There are two possible meanings of **“send her away.”**
  - **“send away” = “ἀπολύω”:**
    1. (2) **to release from a painful condition, free**<sup>8</sup>. In this case, Jesus should give the woman, what she asks for and release her and her daughter from their painful condition.
    2. (3) **to permit or cause someone to leave a particular location let go, send away, dismiss**<sup>9</sup>. In this case, Jesus must cause her to leave.
  - In both possible explanations, the disciples don’t show any mercy and compassion. They want to get rid of her.<sup>10</sup>

❖ **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”**

- **“The lost sheep of Israel”** (See Psalm 79:13; 80:2; 95:7; 100:3)
  - **“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”** (Mt 9:36).

---

<sup>8</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 117).

<sup>9</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 117).

<sup>10</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, p. 54).



- “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel” (Mt 10: 5, 6).
- **“I was sent” = “ἀποστέλλω”**: 1. **to dispatch someone for the achievement of some objective, send away/out.**<sup>11</sup> Jesus was sent by God, his Father.
- The main question remains. Why did Jesus respond to the disciples this way? What is the meaning of this utterance in this context?
  - First, **it may sound like a complaint because Jesus had to withdraw to the region of Tyre and Sidon and leave the lost sheep behind in Galilee!**
  - Look at these hypothetical questions and answers, and compare them with the actual text. These hypothetical questions and answers don’t solve the problem but enhance the sensitivity for the meaning of the actual text:

Location	<i>Galilee</i>
Question	<i>“Lord, why don’t you visit the region of Tyre and Sidon?”</i>
Answer	<i>“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”</i>
Comment	The answer is adequate and understandable, given the location and the question.
Location	<i>The region of Tyre and Sidon</i>
Question	<i>“Lord, why do you visit the region of Tyre and Sidon?”</i>
Answer	<i>“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”</i>
Comment	The question is understandable but the response doesn’t give an explanation and raises new questions: <i>“Then, what are we doing in this region?”</i>
Location	<i>The region of Tyre and Sidon</i>
Question	<i>“Lord, why don’t you answer the cries of the woman.”</i>
Answer	<i>“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”</i>
Comment	The question is clear given the situation. The response is an adequate explanation for the moment, although it sounds harsh, and is devoid of mercy.
Location	<i>Galilee</i>

<sup>11</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 120).

Question	<i>"Send the Canaanite woman away, for she keeps crying out after us."</i>
Answer	<i>"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."</i>
Comment	The question is clear given the location (Galilee). The response is more or less adequate for the moment. (If we keep on ignoring her, she will stop sooner or later.) This reaction is also devoid of mercy.
Location	<i>The region of Tyre and Sidon</i>
Question	<i>"Send the Canaanite woman away, for she keeps crying out after us."</i>
Answer	<i>"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."</i>
Comment	<p>There is a little detail in the question of the disciples which draws the attention: <i>"She keeps crying after us."</i> Jesus starts his answer with <i>"I was sent."</i></p> <p>The disciples motivate their urgent question with <i>"for she keeps crying out."</i> They don't show any compassion for the Canaanite woman and her daughter.</p> <p><i>"The lost sheep of Israel"</i> reveals the compassion of God and Jesus for his people. But this mission didn't exclude other people! (Mt 8:5-13). In Matthew 28:16-20, all nations will be included. A tentative conclusion is that Jesus is distancing himself from the disciples, probably because their urgent request was merciless.</p>

### Verse 25-28 (scene 3)

- ❖ **"The woman came and knelt before him."** Probably, Jesus and his disciples came to a standstill. The woman seized the opportunity and approached him.
  - **"knelt" = "προσκυνέω": to express in attitude or gesture one's complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure, (fall down and) worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully.**<sup>12</sup>  
*"The present context suggests that the woman is either kneeling or, more likely, prostrating herself on the ground, pleading with Jesus to heal her child."*<sup>13</sup>
- ❖ **"Lord, help me!"** She is not crying. It is the shortest possible personal request. Only three words. More words are not needed. There is no need to explain the situation to Jesus, to give more details about her daughter. The Lord knows.

<sup>12</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 882).

<sup>13</sup> Newman, B. M., & Stine, P. C. (1992, p. 496).

❖ **“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”**

- What is the meaning and purpose of this utterance or this saying? There is a major question to be asked. What is the metaphorical character of the saying?
  - Does this saying consist of different metaphors?<sup>14</sup>

Children	The people of Israel
Dogs	The Syro-Phoenicians (the people living in the region of Tyre and Sidon), Canaanite woman, Greeks, and Romans; the pagans
Bread	The blessings of the Kingdom of God

- In this case, the utterance says: “Is not right to take the blessings of the Kingdom of God, which are meant for the people of Israel (only) and toss it to the pagans. This explanation is in line with the previous saying “I am sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”
- “It is not right” is according to this explanation a blunt refusal of the petition of the woman. *“If I am grating your request, I am doing something, which is not right to do.”* But this would contradict what follows in the story.
- Does this saying consist of one composite metaphor?
  - Does it depict a domestic scene? The children are waiting for their bread. Little dogs are moving around under the table. The father takes the bread, but instead of giving it to his children, he is tossing the bread to his dogs. “This is not right!”
- What is the difference between the first and the second explanation?
  - The first explanation sounds like a blunt refusal.
  - The second explanation shows a domestic scenery, which the woman understands too. Jesus was evoking a positive response.
- The meaning of the word “**dogs**” solves the question.
  - “**dogs**” = “**κυνάριον**”: diminutive of **κύων** (dog); **a house-dog or lap-dog** in contrast to a dog of the street or farm, but also used with

---

<sup>14</sup> See also: Davies, W. D., & Allison, D. C., Jr. (2004, p. 553).

no diminutive force at all; *little dog, dog* (Mt 15:26, 27; Mk 7:27, 28), house-dogs that eat the scraps from the table.<sup>15</sup> The saying refers to a domestic scenery.

- “Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”
  - She is reversing the saying of Jesus and doesn’t argue with him: “Yes, Lord.”

He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

“Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

- She is using the same domestic picture. Look at the opposites:
  - crumbs < > (children’s) bread
  - fall < > to take and toss
  - masters’ table < > children’s (bread)

❖ **“Woman, you have great faith!”**

- Faith = “πίστις”: 2. **believing on the basis of the reliability of the one trusted, trust, confidence, faith** in the active sense = ‘believing’, in Jesus.<sup>16</sup>
  - “little faith” (Mt 6:30; 8:26; 14:21; 16:8; 17:20)
  - “lack of faith” (Mt 13:58)
  - “your (their) faith” (Mt 9:2; 22, 29)
  - “faith and do not doubt” (Mt 21:21)
  - “great faith” (Mt 8:10). This is an interesting parallel.

○ Her “great faith” is set as an example for the “the lost sheep of Israel.” and for the disciples!

- Note, the praise by Jesus!

❖ **“Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour.”**

- The daughter was healed just by the authoritative word of Jesus.

<sup>15</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, 575).

<sup>16</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 818).

## Application

- ❖ It is necessary to read the story aloud a few times.
- ❖ As an exercise, it is possible to write from two or three different viewpoints. An example.
  - (1) Disciple: "We had to leave Galilee because of growing tensions. Jesus was heading for the region of Tyre and Sidon. We were walking together and suddenly we heard a Canaanite woman screaming. Jesus didn't do anything about it. He kept silent. We became annoyed because she continued to cry. Therefore, we decided to ask Jesus to do something about the situation. So, we asked him a few times to send her away. He said: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." We were puzzled. Did he mean that he would completely ignore the woman? At that time, she came near, fell to the ground and said only three words: "Lord, help me!" Jesus replied with that saying about the bread, the children and the dogs. Why? Amazingly, the woman knew perfectly how to respond. She acknowledged the truth of the saying, and using the same image, she completely reversed it. Jesus said: "Woman, you have great faith." And her daughter was healed at the same hour, as we discovered sometime later.
  - (2) Canaanite woman: "One day, I was out on the street. There was a group of men walking and talking. I recognized Jesus, the son of David. I had seen him before. He had healed many people. Suddenly I realised that he could save my daughter. I started shouting and crying, calling for help, explaining that my daughter suffered greatly from a demon. At first, he didn't show any reaction. So, I kept on screaming (continue...).
- ❖ Try to avoid or to correct any existing misconceptions about the silencing by Jesus, his answer to the disciples, and his initial answer to the Canaanite woman.
- ❖ Silence can be of use to uncover thoughts and feelings. Jesus uncovers the thoughts of the disciples – they want to get rid of her, and of the woman – a great faith.
  - Great faith will overcome silence, irritation not.
  - Pay attention to the difference between the two (urgent) requests:
    - "Send her away." (Disciples)
    - "Lord, help me." (Canaanite woman)
- ❖ Her "great faith" is set as an example for the "the lost sheep of Israel." and for the disciples!
  - It is not advisable to tell the people that a "great faith" is a prerequisite for healing and salvation.

## Bibliography

Davies, W. D., & Allison, D. C., Jr. (2004). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (Vol. 2). London; New York: T&T Clark International.

Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Newman, B. M., & Stine, P. C. (1992). *A handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*. New York: United Bible Societies.

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.