

I've got to say, as a pastor, I find Jesus' actions in Matthew chapter 15 inexcusable and reprehensible...

How's that for an opening line? "Pastor Hoff is criticizing Jesus!"

Now, obviously, I say that to grab your attention, not because it's true. But do you see where I'm coming from? Can you imagine your pastor treating you the way Jesus treats this woman?

Imagine: your daughter is sick. She is sitting in an ICU and none of the treatments are working. So you call me, your pastor. I don't pick up, you leave a voicemail, but I never call you back.

You are so desperate to feel God's love, to hear some comforting words, that you leave your sick child and show up on my doorstep. You ring the doorbell, knock on the door, you can see me through the window, sitting on the couch, but I completely ignore you.

You stand there all morning knocking, hammering on the door, but I just sit there sipping my coffee...

After a few hours I get my butt off the couch and start to go about my daily chores. You follow behind me yelling at the top of your lungs, "Pastor, I need your help! Pastor, please!"

And still I ignore you.

Finally, you drop down on your knees in front of me, you grab ahold of my feet, with tears streaming down your face, you beg, "Pastor, help me, please!"

I look you right in the eyes and say, "Why would I help you? Stop wasting my time. Leave me alone so I can go take care of some people who deserve my help."

Can you imagine how would feel if I treated you that way?

And yet, that is exactly how we see Jesus treating a woman with a demon-possessed little girl today...

What's going on here?

Jesus, through this powerfully compelling episode from his life wants to teach us some pretty important things. He wants to teach us a powerful lesson about humility and faith and how God operates in this world.

So, let's take a closer look at the story. Let's read it, line by line, sentence by sentence.

"Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon."

Pretty important to understanding this story is knowing what happened right before this. Jesus had endured another frustrating encounter with the Pharisees.

The Pharisees: those religious leaders of Jesus' day whose primary fault was a gross overestimation of their ability to make God happy by their morality. They were the religious folks who never missed a Sunday service, always went to Bible study, always volunteered, gave loads of time and money to the church. The Pharisee is the one who broke his arm, patting himself on the back, when he stood up and prayed, **"God, I thank you that I am not like other people..."** – a gross overestimation of his own ability to foster a good relationship with God by doing the right things. And this

overestimation of abilities not only ruined the Pharisees relationship with God, it also ruined their relationships to all sorts of other people because they spent a lot of time looking down on others when those other people (those "sinners") didn't display the same level of moral fortitude.

Jesus was frustrated because the Pharisees just didn't get it. On the outside their behavior and choices may have been spotless and clean, but on the inside, their hearts were still infected with sin.

Jesus was also frustrated with his disciples. They didn't get it either. They still thought that having a good relationship with God was based on what you did or didn't do. Or your relationship depended to whom you were related - an important truth from Jesus' day, there was a rampant racial superiority streak among the Israelites, they thought they were better than everyone else because they were related to Abraham – a gross misapplication of what it meant to be God's chosen people.

So Jesus walked away. He left that place and went to Tyre and Sidon. He went to a place north of Israel on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. He left the land of God's chosen people. Let's keep reading.

Matthew says, **"A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him."**

Do you remember who the Canaanites were? 1500 years before Jesus walked this earth God had ordered the complete extermination of the Canaanites. Every Canaanite man, woman, and child was to be killed because they stubbornly clung to their pet sins (it was a command the Israelites failed to obey, which is why there were still Canaanites 1500 years later). Remember that racial superiority I was talking about: From an Israelite's perspective, Canaanites were the moral dregs of the world.

So this Canaanite woman, from a group of people that had rejected God until he finally gave up on them, comes up to Jesus, **criying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."**

And this is where our hearts go out to her, right? She may have been a Canaanite, but she knew who Jesus was. **"Lord, Son of David"** – that is a Biblically loaded title she uses for Jesus. This is a title for the Messiah, the Savior from sin that God had been promising for thousands of years. The news that Jesus had come to save had spread like wildfire beyond the borders of Israel. This woman had heard the good news about Jesus, and God had used that message to create faith in her heart – faith that was now looking to Jesus for salvation.

She may have been a Canaanite but she knew who Jesus was, and she needed his help.

She is a heartbroken mother going through living hell. Her daughter is possessed by a demon. Each day is a living nightmare her daughter's mind and body are tortured by the spawn of Satan.

Our hearts go out to her. She may be a Canaanite, but she's doing all the right things. She is hurting and she comes to Jesus – the one who came to help women just like her, the one who had proven his power over demons for so many others – but unlike all those others who had come crawling to Jesus for help, this time Matthew tells

us, “Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, ‘Send her away, for she keeps on crying out after us.’”

The Bible doesn’t tell us how long this silent treatment by Jesus went on, but it was long enough for the disciples to get sick of it. “Jesus send her away.”

Were the disciples trying to be compassionate? Did they see this woman humiliating herself by continuing to chase after a man who apparently wanted nothing to do with her?

Were they driven by compassion or was this some of that racial superiority leaking through? “Come on lady, knock it off. Jesus didn’t come for people like you. God has already made pretty clear how he feels about Canaanites.”

It seems possible that it was the latter because Matthew emphasizes her race, and because Jesus shockingly seems to agree with that ethnic superiority: **Jesus answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”** In other words, “Sorry, can’t help you, wrong race.”

This is not a side of Jesus we are accustomed to seeing. He usually helps people who come to him for help, but not this woman... he dismisses her... “Sorry, wrong race.” What’s going on?

Well, Jesus wasn’t lying. He *was* sent by his Father to preach to Israel. In God’s plan for salvation, Jesus would teach primarily Jews, and his Jewish disciples would be sent out into all the world. But at the same time, the Bible makes clear that Jesus had come for all. “**God so loved the world,**” John said. Jesus didn’t ignore the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus didn’t say, “Sorry, wrong race,” to the Roman Centurion who came to Jesus with a very similar request.

So, what is going on here? Well, let’s keep reading.

Jesus ignores her. Jesus dismisses her because of her race.

And yet this woman’s faith that Jesus was the Son of David, refused to let go of Jesus. Matthew tells us: **The woman came and knelt before him, “Lord, help me!”**

And what does Jesus do? He goes from ignoring and dismissing to insulting: **“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”** We Americans sure do love and pamper our dogs, but not in Israel. This is a challenging insult: “You don’t deserve my love and help. Why should I give it to you?”

Again, not a side of Jesus we are accustomed to seeing. But let’s keep reading.

Ignored, dismissed, and insulted *still* she clings, **“Yes Lord... you are right. I am a dog. I don’t deserve anything from you... yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”**

This is what humility looks like. Jesus calls her a dog and she agrees. She doesn’t fight it or deny it, she doesn’t get insulted like the Pharisees so often did. She knows herself. She knows her sins – the sins of her ancestors, the sins of action, the sins of her heart. She knows she doesn’t deserve a thing from God.

This is also what faith looks like. She knew she was a dog, but she also knew and believed that there was nowhere else to go. No one and nothing else could love her like Jesus could. No one and nothing else could save her like Jesus could. She knew she

was a dog who deserved nothing, but she also knew that Jesus was so awesome that all she would need were some crumbs. The crumbs from Jesus’ table would still be better than anything else. Ignored, dismissed, and insulted, her God-given faith digs its nails in – she would not let go of Jesus.

Finally, the façade disappears, and the Jesus we know and love says to her, **“Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment,** Matthew tells us.

This is one of only two people whose faith is praised by Jesus in the pages of the Bible... which means this is something we should pay attention to, something we should learn from...

First, let’s learn humility. Frustrated by the Pharisees, Jesus shows his disciples and us what the opposite of Phariseeism looks like.

Contrary to what the Pharisees thought, your relationship with God has nothing to do with your performance... at least, not your good performance. It has everything to do with understanding how poorly we have performed, how little we deserve God’s love and attention, how much we need God to have mercy. Your relationship with God depends on understanding, like this woman, that you don’t deserve to be a child in God’s house. You are no better than a dog.

Learn humility because your relationship with God depends on humility.

It is a biblical fact that our God likes to make something out of nothing. If you think you are something, there’s not much he can do with you. Case in point: the Pharisees, who thought they were something and because of it their relationship with God was ruined.

So learn humility from this woman. I don’t care how many times you come to church in a given year. I don’t care how much of your time you have volunteered here at St. Paul’s. I don’t care how many decades you’ve been a faithful member here. I don’t care how much money you give. I don’t care how often you pray or how many hours you spend reading God’s word. You still have not earned *a thing* from your God, because no matter what your outward behavior, your heart is still rotten, through and through. You are still a dog.

Learn humility from this Canaanite woman because when you realize you are nothing, that is when God can do something with you. The humble heart is a heart that is prime for mercy and love – this woman proves that.

This truth that none of us deserve God’s love, not only influences our relationship with God, but also has vast implications for how we treat each other – our fellow human beings – a lesson those prejudiced disciples needed to learn and a lesson we need too.

If we are all in the same boat, if every human on this planet is a dog, then there is no room for feelings of superiority, there is no room to look down on someone else because of their race, skin color, political affiliation, skeleton-filled past, or good work-filled or not filled present. The humility God’s word calls for is the ultimate field leveler and prejudice destroyer.

Learn humility from this woman and secondly, learn from Jesus an important truth how God operates in this world.

It is not uncommon for Jesus to expect us to wrestle. Jesus is not a helicopter parent. When life gets hard and scary he does not always and immediately swoop in and save the day. Sometimes he takes a step back and waits to see how we react. He gives us an opportunity to exercise the faith he has given us. He seemingly ignores his children. He lets us shout louder and louder and louder, sometimes with no reply.

Learn humility, learn that it is not uncommon for Jesus to expect his children to wrestle with him. You are not the first person to feel, at times, like Jesus is distant and ignoring you.

Finally learn what faith looks like.

Look at this woman. Look at her faith! Look at how she grabs a hold of Jesus and says, “Even if you ignore me, dismiss me, and insult me, I’m not going anywhere because there is no one and nothing that can love me like you. Even scraps from you are enough for a dog like me.”

Matthew 15 is a compelling story.

Read it and know that you are a dog. You do not deserve *anything* from you God.

But don’t stop there. Keep reading the story all the way to the end and see what faith looks like.

Keep reading and know that this dog of a woman got way more than crumbs from Jesus... so do we.

And then if you ever find yourself at a place in life where you feel like this woman – if you ever feel like God is distant, and far away; if you ever feel like he is ignoring you, dismissing you, or piling insult onto injury – keep reading.

Keep reading in the life of Jesus, read about the time when he was ignored and dismissed as he hung on the cross, abandoned by his Father in heaven, crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He endured that dismissal so we could know, beyond any shadow of a doubt that when we feel like God is ignoring and dismissing us it is only a façade – he loves us, even when we don’t feel like it. So learn a lesson from this Canaanite woman and keep clinging to your Jesus. Keep reading your Bible and God promises he will strengthen the arms of your faith so you can cling to Jesus.

Fellow dogs, the crumbs of God are enough. Know that because of Jesus dogs become sons and daughters receiving a lot more than crumbs.

Amen.