

Applying our Faith

Our faith in Jesus Christ can have real-life applications if we really put what we learn from the Gospels into practice. While the Gospel of Jesus Christ came after Joseph, we heard from the Hebrew Bible how important the role of forgiveness played in the reconciliation of Joseph with his brothers. The ideas of forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation span the entirety of the Bible. Every church, regardless of denomination, lay claim to them. People need forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation with God, and with others. The only way for them to have that is to turn to Jesus Christ, and allow Him to be their Lord and Savior.

We're going to take a look today at a story in Matthew's gospel. Now, before we get into it, we need a little background information. Last week we heard about Jesus walking across the Sea of Galilee during a storm, and when He reached the boat, Peter and the other disciples knelt and worshiped Him. After this, some of the religious people from Jerusalem showed up in the area, and were complaining to Jesus because His followers weren't obeying their traditions. Jesus points out to them that in following their traditions, they are disobeying God's word. So that brings us to what we're going to look at this morning. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 15:10-28. I'll be reading from the NRSV Bible today. **Read Matthew 15:10-28.**

Almost anytime we see Jesus in the Gospels, He has a crowd of people around Him. And usually, when the crowd gathers, He does some teaching. This is what we see in the first couple verses of our passage. "Then He called the crowd to Him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles,'" (Matt. 15:10-11). This is in response to the Pharisees' complaint earlier in the chapter (verse 2), that Jesus' disciples weren't washing their hands before they ate. We do that today – wash our hands before we eat – because we understand germs and stuff. In those days, they didn't have that medical health knowledge. The Pharisees weren't doing the hand washing to prevent the spread of illness, either. They were doing it to put on a show. To make a spectacle of themselves, and feed a "See how righteous I am?" kind of pride.

Following Traditions

See, the Pharisees were all about following traditions they had cooked up over the centuries, of how people ought to live, rather than just following what the Bible had told them on how to live. The message God gave His people in our Old Testament, and the message Christ gave us in the New Testament has never changed. It has always been, "to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God," (Micah 6:8), or put a simpler way, "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbors as yourself," (Luke 10:27).

“Then the disciples approached and said to Him, ‘Do You know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what You said?’” (Matt. 15:12). See, the Pharisees heard this and they were “offended.” Jesus had quite the knack for offending religious people! Friends, when we say or do things that causes offense to the religious, who are more focused on following rules than on being just and merciful, we’re in great company! We’re following in the footsteps of Jesus – and that’s exactly what we want to do – follow Him. We should be in the regular habit of afflicting the comfortable, and comforting the afflicted!

When they tell Jesus he offended them, notice what He tells the disciples. “Every plant that My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit,” (verses 13-14). In other words, don’t worry about the religious people and their criticisms. Stay the course – God will see you through. Have you ever noticed how clueless the disciples are made out to be in the Gospels? Here’s an example of it. “But Peter said to Him, ‘Explain this parable to us.’ Then He said, ‘Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile,’” (verses 15-20).

Words in Action Speak Volumes

What comes out of our mouths – the things we say, the stuff we do, verbalizing and acting on our thoughts – is what defines whether we’re clean or unclean in Jesus’ view. That’s the irony. In seeking to be righteous, pure, and holy, the religious created a barrier which separated them from God. To be honest, some of the most difficult people to love I’ve ever known were religious people. They would downplay your kindness with their morality every time. You could never do enough to please them. If you came to church every Sunday morning, you should have been there Sunday night. If you gave a tithe, you should’ve given more. If you didn’t drink, smoke, or chew, you probably needed to cut back on your carbs and lose some weight. Have you ever known anyone like that? You just can’t please them.

In contrast to the Pharisees, Matthew throws in the story of the Canaanite woman. He writes, “Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon,” (verse 21). Tyre and Sidon were cities in modern-day Lebanon. They were big cities in the time of King David and Solomon. Back in the books of Kings, Solomon signs a treaty with Hiram, King of Tyre, to purchase cedars of Lebanon to build the temple. The people living there were not Jewish – they were Gentiles.

Notice what the Canaanite woman does. She “came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon,’” (verse 22). She’d obviously heard about Jesus. She was desperate to help her daughter. What follows is an exchange between Jesus and the woman, that’s honestly, a little embarrassing from our modern-day point of view.

First, Matthew says that Jesus ignored her altogether. “But He did not answer her at all. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ (verse 23). Jesus ignored her, the disciples want Him to send her away from them. Wow. When Jesus answers, look what He says. “He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,’” (verse 24). Clearly, He didn’t want to have anything to do with her. She was a Gentile, after all.

Is It Fair?

But the woman persisted. Matthew writes, “But she came and knelt before Him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’” (verse 25). Now this word for “knelt,” is the same word used in last week’s passage where the disciples worshiped Jesus in the boat. Keep that in mind, because we’ll come back to it. Again, with the woman on the ground, begging for help, Jesus refused. “He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,’” (verse 26). But she wouldn’t take no for an answer. “She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table,’” (verse 27). It’s at this point that Jesus gives in, and grants the woman’s request.

“Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed from that moment,” (verse 28). Was it fair, that this woman’s daughter was afflicted, and only Jesus was the One able to provide the cure? I’ll let you wrestle with that. If this chapter is all about ritual purity, what does this Canaanite woman have that the religious folks of the day lack? I’ll give you a hint – it’s an eight-letter word that starts with “h.” Got it?

Humility. She has it – a lot of it. Her willingness to let go of every last bit of the pride she has is on full display as she throws herself at the feet of the Master that leads her daughter to be healed and secures a place for herself among Jesus’ followers. Because of our modern-day mindsets we often do not grasp the subtleties in Scripture passages like this one. There’s racial prejudice at play here – societal norms and customs being challenged – by the Canaanite woman, but also by Jesus. See, the Jewish people viewed Gentiles, like the Canaanites, the Romans, and other groups like the Samaritans, as sub-human.

When you hear the word, “sub-human,” what do you think of? An animal, right? A dog. Some of you have a dog, or have had one in the past. They’re loyal, protective, and sometimes they like to bark. This Canaanite woman – canine-ite woman – falls at Jesus’ feet, dogging His footsteps and those of His disciples, making a complete nuisance of herself. “Send her away,” the disciples say, “she keeps barking at us.” Jesus tells her, “I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” but it doesn’t stop her. She came, knelt, barks for mercy, and worshiped Him.

I’m a dog, too

This dog of a woman – that’s what the Canaanites were thought of by the Jews – was quite willing to play the part. She was willing, to literally get down on all fours and start begging. So she’s not only a Canaanite, and woman, but now also a dog. How low can a person sink? “Lord, help me,” she whimpers. And Jesus responds – “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and give it to the dogs.” “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their Master’s table.”

That's exactly what Jesus wanted to hear – what He needed to hear from her. He tells her that her faith is great, that what she has asked will be done, and her daughter was instantly healed. This isn't anything new in Jesus' ministry. From the beginning, He had been consistent that His message was directed to those poor in spirit. It was for the lowest of the low in heart, to the emotionally down-and-out. It was for those who were knocked down on all fours – because life in this world is very unfair – and they're still willing to crawl. His ministry was to the dogs, in other words. I want to show you a movie clip, just to get this point across. Play video clip from *Mr. Peabody and Sherman*, located here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjPq-r91oB4>.

The Canaanite woman came, taking Jesus at His word, groveling and grateful for any little scrap that might fall from His table. She became a dog. Her great faith had nothing to do with how good she was, how much she was devoted to God, or whether she'd done good deeds for others. It had to do with her need for a power greater than herself and her willingness to confess it. So today, like those characters in the movie clip, I'll say, "I'm a dog, too." I need Jesus – and I hope you do, too.

Gone to the Dogs

This passage makes it very clear that there's a place in God's kingdom for the least, the last, and the lost. In other words, it's a kingdom that's gone to the dogs – it's given to messed up people like us. It also tells us there's space for others, as well – for those we might least expect to be included in God's family. Next time you run across someone you think is beyond God's grasp, think again! God has a special place in His heart for the underdog – for those we would never, ever expect to have God's favor.

On page 121 of the *United Methodist Hymnal*, we see the way priest and poet Frederick Faber put it. "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea; there's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty. There's welcome for the sinner, and more graces for the good! There is mercy with the Savior; there is healing in His blood." For whatever reason, our hymnal cut out his third verse: "But we make God's love too narrow by false limits of our own, and we magnify its strictness with a zeal God will not own." What a beautiful statement! "For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind. If our love were but more simple, we should rest upon God's word; and our lives would be illumined by the presence of our Lord."

Friends, be as faithful a follower of Jesus as you possibly can. Be religious, if you will. Just be careful to not let your righteousness stand in the way of God's infinite mercy, grace, and love. Dare to have the faith of a dog – eager to please, and willing to take your place at the Master's feet! Amen! Let's pray, and then we'll move into our Back-to-School blessing time.

Prayer: Holy One of Israel, Covenant-Keeper, You restore what is lost, heal what is wounded, and gather in those who have been rejected. Give us the faith to speak steadfastly like the Canaanite woman did; that the outcast may be welcomed and all people may be blessed. Amen.