

## *The Cast* | People Engaged In the Story of Jesus Christ

### *The Stranger*

#### *Matthew 15:21-28*

*February 28, 2016*

*Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." <sup>23</sup> But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, "Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us." <sup>24</sup> But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." <sup>25</sup> But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" <sup>26</sup> And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." <sup>27</sup> But she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed at once.*

*We're looking at Matthew, Mark, Luke and John: the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and especially how the minor characters intersect with the Major Character. Through all the interactions we come to see the people in a new light AND how HE IS revealed in the context of relationship with others.*

*This particular passage finds Jesus in "the bad-lands"; He's North of Galilee, outside of Israel; He's where the gentiles live. And it's here, in this unlikely place that He finds what He's after. What He has NOT found in His own people (where we'd EXPECT to find it) He now finds it "on the other side of the tracks".*

*He finds a spark of true spirituality where His disciples expected to find only a spiritual wasteland. And it's a rich opportunity for US to look at an element of true spirituality that is VERY CENTRAL to the whole Christian approach.*

*If you want to understand what it means to be a follower/disciple of Jesus Christ...if you're trying to get a grip on what Christianity IS...THIS LITTLE EPISODE is a vivid picture of something all Christians hold to be essential. There is no True Spirituality... you cannot connect to God without THIS... And while people speak about it IN OUR SOCIETY...and use the word in all kinds of ways...there's a lot misunderstanding about it... TODAY WE GET TO SEE, "What do Christians mean by the word, 'FAITH'?"*

*Why's it so important? How does it relate to knowing God? How is it begun/formed in a person?... What do we have to contribute to the process? What is faith?*

*Let's look at this needy woman and how faith is born in her: #1 – The Clear Depiction of Need*

*#2 – The Crucial Incubation of Need*

*#3 – The Counterintuitive Redemption of Need*

*Jesus Christ is performing miracles and becoming VERY widely known. His twelve students are overwhelmed and they can't find a place to process all that's happening...because people are hounding them wherever they go (pun intended).*

*And while the crowds seem to love Him, He has been publically denounced and rejected by His hometown synagogue in the very conservative, very Jewish town of Nazareth. And NOW the Jerusalem religious establishment has sent a delegation to investigate Him and express their great concern about Him.*

*At the start of this chapter, He refutes this religious delegation because they've twisted the way of grace that God gave them into an elaborate system of rules that ONLY THEY could keep. They were obsessed with food-rules and Jesus Christ says, "It's NOT what goes into your mouth that corrupts you...it's what comes OUT OF YOUR MOUTH... your souls are rotten and it comes out in your words...but YOU ignore your rotten words/need because you're too focused on how good your eating habits are!"*

*And then comes a woman...who simply can't ignore her need.*

*She's called a Canaanite woman and that term was no longer used in the first century... Sometimes racial labels change (think of the NFL team from Washington...an outdated, offensive name). The people in this region (Tyre/Sidon) were ancestors of those who fought against the Israelites...Matthew reminds us of what they USED to be called...opens an old wound. Canaanites "made their children pass through the fire" – child-sacrifice to Baal...and taught the Israelites to do the same.*

*She's just a puddle of need...her daughter is possessed by an evil spirit. I admit, I don't know a lot about this...it looks like insanity in some people... it's NOT that the Bible sees all sickness or mental illness as demonic possession... I only know it was and is terrible...and torment to the person possessed.*

*For this woman...and I think for most parents who see their children suffering...the torment the children feel is felt twice by the parents. I remember one of our kids had a root canal at the age of four and Missy and I had to restrain the child during the drilling... nothing worse than seeing your children suffer.*

*"She was crying out, saying, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.'" There's something evil in it when a child suffers... she herself feels the torment and she is so at one with the child...SHE needs mercy. (Who needs mercy, you or your child? ...YEAH...that's what I said!)*

*She's screaming and... so apparently desperate .*

*And when it looks like He's not going to help, she resorts to throwing herself at his feet and she's repeating the words, "Lord, help me!"*

*It's really a pitiful sight ...a clear depiction of need.*

*And because we know Jesus Christ, we're sure He will help her...but instead...He ignores her.*

*What deeper form of hatred could there be than to be apathetic (lit. to NOT feel) in the face of such clear need? V. 23 "But He did not answer her a word."*

*And the disciples (who ARE, remember, in desperate need themselves...need of a vacation...a retreat) the disciples "implored" the Rabbi, "Send her away... she keeps shouting at us!"*

*And then He ignores them TOO...and rather than send her away...He engages her...in a dismissive kind of way, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (24)*

*And yet she doesn't leave but falls at His feet...what doesn't this Gentile...this Canaanite understand...She is NOT a child of Abraham...she's a stranger to the promise...She is NOT of Israel.*

*And then Jesus Christ...seemingly increases the heat of His rejection... "I have come to summons the children of Abraham...and it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to dogs."*

*Is Jesus Christ ...a racist? Is He so exclusive? Would He reject this sobbing mother as a dog...?*

*And yet ...something happens...something awakens in her...something He said...far from discouraging her, seems to bring her to life... It turns out that He didn't refer to her as a dog...one of those wild scavenger pariah coyote/wolf despised predators of the Middle East...but Matthew uses the diminutive... "It is not good to give the children's bread to the puppies..." That's the word he used. He shuts the door...but He doesn't lock it and she...this puddle of need...she seizes the moment...and snaps back:*

*"Yeah, but even the puppies get to eat what crumbs fall from the table... AND LORD, it seems that YOUR children...are leaving a lot of crumbs...don't seem hungry for what YOUR serving... but I AM!"*

*And in a way that seems very similar to the experience of the First Israelite...who first got the name Israel after he stubbornly refused to let go of the angel of the Lord...but wrestled all night and said, "I will NOT let You go until you bless me..." and that's when Jacob the wrestler had his name changed to Israel (Gen 32.22ff)...So, this woman...has become a True Child of Abraham...a wrestler...one who strives with God.*

*It was the crucial incubation of need. Had Jesus Christ simply helped her after the first request, her faith would never have come to life...premature and undeveloped...stillborn...a wasted crisis!*

*The delay...was necessary...was crucial...HE HAD TO MAKE HER GO FULL TERM...the fullness of time...and only THEN to birth her faith into being.*

*It's really NOT a rejection or a denial...it's incubation. The egg of need hatches and faith comes out of need...out of desperation...out of hope...faith is born.*

*This may not look like the Jesus you thought you knew... but He actually does this A LOT. He makes that synagogue leader Jairus WAIT...even though the daughter is sick unto death and even dies... The need has to incubate...and He says, "Only believe."*

*His friend Lazarus is on his death bed...and they send messengers to find the Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth and John records, "So when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was." (John 11.6). It looks like a mistake... but it's the crucial incubation of need.*

*And then...the need of the whole world (think of it!) ...Jews and Gentiles alike...unable to save ourselves...the world is waiting and then...our need incubates and in the fullness of time God sends forth His son born of a woman born under the Law in order to redeem those who were under the Law...that WE might become the children of God. (Galatians 4.4)*

*Jesus Christ Himself would refuse the short-cut in the wilderness offered by the devil...and would instead go the long way, go full term, until all was "finished"...He goes the way of the Cross. He would become Himself needy in the extreme. He would enter our NEED in order to be able to redeem our need.*

*He would be the Child...in torment...and the Father (Who was eternally ONE with His Beloved Son) would NOT rescue...would NOT spare the Son...but instead would put MY GUILT ON HIS SHOULDERS and deal Him the death I deserved...and the NEED must incubate three days... HE REDEEMS NEED.*

*It's all counterintuitive...but in the end your need may actually be YOUR best spiritual asset. A crisis is a terrible thing to waste...but counter-intuitively, God can turn crises to faith...and faith is the conduit through which grace flows. By faith, we receive GRACE. By faith we open ourselves to*

*be empowered and transformed by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3.5). Our need, under the power of God...incubates... and becomes faith...and our name changes...our very identity ...our nature and very self becomes NEW. Jacob becomes Israel; the Canaanite puppy becomes a daughter of Zion!*

*Today, the “spiritual but not religious” crowd has said, “Faith has NO content...no doctrines...no way to be defined because that leads only to division...only experience matters...and all experience is equally valid.” BUT THIS desperate mother DID somehow believe in a doctrine: she believed that King David would have Descendant...an Heir who would be the perfect King with power to make all things right. And that’s why she referred to Jesus Christ AS that Person, the Son of David...and LORD.*

*Today, the New Atheists are saying we need no faith only facts...and yet they believe all kinds of things that are not empirically provable.*

*And today, as in Jesus Christ’s day, there are religious people who think, “I’m good and beautiful just the way I am...I need only do my best and pay my taxes and be a good person...stay positive...I don’t need faith in some bloody Man on a Cross; I just need to try harder...and keep washing my hands.”*

*But that’s salvation by works...it’s condemned.*

*But the Bible teaches that faith has facts...doctrines...truths...real events: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

*And faith calls us to agree with those facts. To believe what God has said...His promises...His work in Jesus Christ...*

*And faith is ALSO...maybe THE MAIN COMPONENT highlighted in this woman – FAITH IS TRUST.*

*The Westminster Confession defines faith as a gift from God and “ the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life,(on the basis) of grace.”*

*It is a gift from God in which we receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel. (WSC 86)*

*It’s trust...not based on my experience...but based on what happened on a Hill far away.*

*It is a resting...a dependency...accepting that God saves me... loves me...likes me...adopts me...owns me... NOT because I am good or try hard but IN MY NEED, He came for Me.*

*The real Stranger in today’s text...is not a Canaanite woman...but the God-Man who came from*

*outside of this world...He invaded...He came to fetch us. He became estranged from His Father in order to redeem us...to redeem the worst things about us...to turn our NEED into that kind of tenacious dependency, that desperate inability to help or save ourselves that cries out to the Son of David, "Have mercy on me" ...and can sometimes only muster a word or two, "Lord, Help Me".*

*Look, your need may be your best friend. You may have fallen into a Big Moral Mess...and if people knew it about you you'd DIE...or you may have been so mistreated by your parents that you don't even have any idea how to relate to people today...or you may have a disability that has you wracked with pain... or you may have a marriage that is JUST NOT MAKING IT...or a child that is just out there and you're clueless...*

*Don't you see? That could be the BEST THING YOU HAVE GOING for you?*

*It may be the kind of thing that turns you into a wrestler like Jacob ("I won't let go til you bless me!") or turns you into a screaming mess like this woman...*

*If you can see this part of you through the lens of Jesus Christ who redeems need...it may turn out to be incubating ...and may lead to faith ...to grace...to God... Just call out...even now, "Lord, help me!"*