

The King Who Heals the Nations

Matthew 15:21-31

There are perhaps few things more painful and embarrassing in my memory that some of the social faux pas that I've committed. The worst by far was on my first date with Carissa. We went out to eat at one of those Japanese Tepanyaki restaurants—the kind where they throw knives and light little onion volcanoes on fire. We sit down and I order steak and chicken while Carissa orders the steak and shrimp combo, and I'm thinking, *Sweet—I'll get to try the shrimp too. There's no way she's going to finish all that.* But at the end of the meal, I look over, and there's no shrimp or steak left. And what came out of my mouth are words which I will carry in deep regret all the way to the grave: “Wow, you're a good eater.” Men, if you're looking for dating advice, don't *ever* say anything remotely close to that. You know Carissa operates by grace because not only was there a second date, but she actually married me.

It's always embarrassing and awkward to witness or commit a social faux pas. But how much more awkward is it when the one who seems to commit it is the one we call King and Savior? That's the effect that the story before us in Matthew has on many people today.

We read this story and what comes across like Jesus' insensitivity (ignoring the woman's request), and what feels like a derogatory comment (calling her a *dog*—our kids get in trouble for speaking like that), and there are two knee-jerk reactions we're tempted to make.

The first is to get embarrassed or even outraged at Jesus' behavior and words. The second is to downplay the awkwardness and dismiss any accusations so as to protect Jesus from coming off as offensive. But neither reaction does this passage justice. The former lacks the patience necessary to understand what's really going on. And the latter lacks sensitivity toward those who identify with the needy woman in her minority position, and risks softening some hard edges that are perhaps meant to sting.

What do we make of Jesus in this story? How are we to understand better who he is as Israel's long-awaited King, as the true ruler of heaven and earth in whom all nations are to find their hope (which is the big theme of Matthew's Gospel)? This story is full of surprises, and perhaps the greatest surprise is that the main point of a story that at first seems so awkward and offensive to non-Jews is that *there is healing and wholeness for all nations through faith in Israel's king.*

A Big Problem and the Bigger Plan of God (15:21-24)

At this point in Matthew's Gospel, opposition to Jesus and his message has been growing. He's been traveling in the region of Galilee, continuing to teach and preach, and often working miracles of healing and provisions—signs that God's heavenly kingdom is beginning to dawn on earth.

Last week we saw how the Pharisees had tracked him down all the way from Jerusalem to challenge him and his teaching. So once again, Jesus moves on, as v. 21 tells us, heading now into Gentile or non-Jewish territory: “And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” What he finds there is that the same darkness and brokenness that Israel faces is shared by non-Israelites as well. Even here, people bring to them their sick, their demon-possessed, those in need of healing and wholeness. One more reminder that we live in a broken and fallen world (not that we need much of a reminder as we consider some of the trials we face ourselves).

And so as Jesus enters this area, v. 22 tells us, “And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.’” Here is a woman like so many that we’ve met in this Gospel—a woman in desperate need, pleading for the healing of her demon-oppressed daughter. We don’t talk a lot about demon oppression today, and frankly it’s hard to understand. But there is a very real sense in which the powers of darkness and the minions of Satan are at work to deceive and destroy people’s lives. That is what’s happening to this woman’s daughter. So the mother is desperate, yet in and of herself quite hopeless to see her daughter healed.

If any of you have ever watched helplessly as your child suffered, wanting so desperately to take their place or to do anything to make him or her better, but having no options, then you know the misery this woman is experiencing. The anxiety, the fear, the desperation.

So here we have a woman like many women we’ve met in this story, a woman that some of us can identify quite closely with. But there’s also something different about her than others we’ve met. Matthew describes her as a “Canaanite” woman—she’s not Jewish, she’s a Gentile. And not only a Gentile, but descended from the enemies of ancient Israel, the Canaanites. If you think back to the book of Judges, the nation that was constantly attacking and oppressing God’s people, causing them to turn away from God and into idolatry, were the Canaanites. This woman comes from them, and Matthew emphasizes that background. Mark simply calls her “a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth” (Mk. 7:26), which is enough to stress that she is outside God’s covenant people and not an heir of God’s covenant promises. Matthew stresses that not only is she outside the covenant, but descended from a people who opposed the covenant.

Yet she recognizes that Jesus is *Israel’s* king. That’s remarkable. She calls him “Lord, Son of David.” A Gentile comes seeking help from Israel’s king. So how will Israel’s king respond?

Verse 23: “But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she is crying out after us.’” *Come again?* Is this the same Jesus we’ve been following throughout the story? We can kind of expect that insensitivity from his disciples—they don’t always get it. Telling people to keep children away from Jesus in ch. 19, and Jesus gets after them saying “let the little children come.” But here Jesus seems equally dismissive. And you wonder, what gives?

The woman no doubt wondered the same thing. Here’s her chance for help, for healing for her daughter, some miracle to rescue her. And she runs into the red tape of Israel’s covenant. It’s like facing a deadly cancer diagnosis, and catching word that there is a new drug that has the potential to cure your kind of cancer—there is hope again!—but it’s been stalled by the FDA. Your insurance company refuses to pay for it. Your only hope for healing is within grasp, and

it's being blocked by bureaucratic red tape. So here her chance to see her daughter healed seems blocked by a technicality. She's a Gentile, not a Jew. As Tom Wright notes, "We wouldn't think much of a doctor or nurse who refused to treat a patient because they weren't from the right family background, or weren't the right color. It seems very strange. So what's going on?"¹

Jesus says to the woman in v. 24: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Again, that sounds at first maybe a little narrow and rude—his mission focuses on the Jews, the descendants of Jacob. But in reality Jesus is simply clarifying his mission. Wright explains, Jesus "wasn't simply a travelling doctor whose task was to heal every sick person he met. He had a very specific calling, which he already hinted at in 10.5-6. God's people, Israel, needed to know that their God was now at last fulfilling his promises."²

Not all red tape is a mere technicality. Sometimes it's there for a reason—maybe the protection of people, or maybe for the accomplishment of a purpose. In Jesus' case it's the latter. He was sent for a specific purpose. And though it sounds harsh to our ears, Jesus doesn't owe it to anyone to heal them. If he did, why did he pass so many up? Why do so many remain in pain today? Why, after a successful night of casting out demons and healing all sorts of diseases, when "Simon and those who were with him . . . found him and said to him, 'Everyone is looking for you,'" does Jesus then say, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out" (Mk. 1:36-37)? Jesus' mission is bigger than healing everyone's diseases. And he does not owe it to anyone to heal them.

Here's the one of the hard edges of this passage—not everyone who asks God for healing receives it. Some do, but that means that some don't. This comes off as offensive to some of us. It seems uncaring. Partly because some of us face very real needs that are simply hopeless unless God shows up. And partly because many of us have been raised with the assumption that God's whole job description is to make our lives happy and healthy—he's our personal therapist, our doctor, our cheerleader, our cosmic butler and concierge.³ If we have a need, he owes it to us to meet it. But we have no category for suffering, or how that might fit into the bigger plan.

And there *is* a bigger plan at work—bigger than my life—because there is a deeper problem at stake—yes, deeper than my problems. I don't want for a moment to minimize the very real pain and desperation of the problems some of us face. But if you think about that problem—as horrible as it is, there is something far worse than it, *and* something far better than that problem merely going away. And if that bigger plan does not address that deeper problem, then even our lesser problems of sickness and disease and such will be left to prevail.

The deeper problem is this: our sin. Our rebellion against our holy God, against our Creator and King. We were made to know and love and honor and enjoy God. There is nothing better—nothing longer lasting or more satisfying than to be his child and enjoy his presence forever. But there is nothing worse than to be shut out of his presence and glory, and that's what sin does to us. Those are the consequences of it. It's our sin that separates us from God, and it's our sin that corrupts this world. The very existence of disease, disability, and death are a product of that

¹ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 199.

² Wright, 199.

³ See David Wells, *God in the Whirlwind* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 23; and Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).

original sin in the garden. This world has been corrupted; it doesn't work the way it's supposed to. And so unless the deeper problem of sin is dealt with, unless we can be reconciled with and reunited with God, then even our lesser problems cannot be overcome. We may get better today, but we might die tomorrow. How do we deal with the bigger need—reconciliation with God and resurrection from the dead?

And so there is a bigger plan. A plan that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ordained together before the beginning of time, that the Son would enter into this world to deal with the deeper problem. It's a plan God promised to accomplish through Abraham and his descendants—God's covenant people, Israel. A promise that would eventually extend to all nations through Israel's king. A King who would defeat the power of sin and death by giving his own life on the cross, and by taking it up again in the resurrection. A resurrection that all God's people look forward to in the end, in the day when that king returns and when the dwelling place of God will again be with man. "He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:3-4).

This is our ultimate hope for healing and wholeness before God—what he promises to do in the end. Any healing that Jesus does now is but a sign pointing forward to that greater and complete restoration to come—a restoration that all who trust Christ will share in, Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus initially passes on the woman's request because there was a bigger work of healing that he came to accomplish—one that would in fact benefit all nations eventually. But that benefit would come specifically through Israel. That's why the gospel goes to "the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). If Jesus doesn't attend to his mission with Israel and fulfill the promises of God for his covenant people, there will be no blessing for the nations. And so the focus of Jesus' mission right now is the lost sheep of Israel.

So here's the first application for us. When we pray for healing, or for deliverance from difficulties and problems in life—and *we should pray*—but when we do, we need to *pray with a humility that recognizes there is a larger plan at work*, the details of which we can't always see in the moment. Pray for healing with a humility that recognizes there is a larger plan at work.

A Big Problem and the Bigger Compassion of God (15:25-28)

But the story is not over. The woman is wonderfully persistent. Verse 25: "But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'" You can see and hear the desperation—her posture, kneeling. Her simple plea, "Lord, help me." How could Jesus' heart not be moved to pity?

And yet what follows is for some the most shocking line of the passage, v. 26: "And he answered, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.'" *Really?* Was that necessary? One scholar has called this comment "'the worst kind of chauvinism'—a 'violent rebuff' that reveals 'incredible insolence.'"⁴ It seems rather out of character for the Son of God. So what does he mean?

⁴ F. W. Beare, as cited in Robert Mounce, *Matthew* (NIBC; Hendricksen, 1991), 153.

There are several suggestions of what it meant for Jesus to associate this Gentile woman with dogs. Again, some will try to soften the picture—‘he’s talking about a house pet, not a mangy scavenger roaming the streets.’⁵ Like that helps.

The simplest and most compelling explanation is that dogs, like Gentiles, made no distinction in their eating habits. Israel had a code for what foods were clean and unclean; the Gentiles did not follow that code, and so “dogs” became a frequent analogy to refer to them.⁶ Both children and dogs are under the master’s care, but only one is part of the family. And that’s point here—the priority of covenant membership in receiving God’s blessing.⁷ Who is in the family of God, and who is not? Jesus came for the lost sheep of Israel, the children of promise, and so the gospel and kingdom come to them first. That’s another hard edge in this text. Both will receive their nourishment, but children come first.

But as shocking as Jesus’ words seem to us, the woman’s reply in v. 27 is perhaps the most remarkable thing yet. “She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’” (15:27). Notice how the woman didn’t take offense at the analogy. Neither does she dispute the logic. In fact she *acknowledges* it. “Yes, Lord”—the children take priority. The covenant must be fulfilled. She knows she’s talking to *Israel’s* king. Here is a Canaanite who gets the plan of God better than most Jews at the time. But isn’t there mercy to spare? Aren’t those outside the covenant happy to enjoy any scraps that fall from the table? That’s all I want, just a crumb. That’s all it will take—but a crumb of your healing power to set my daughter free.

Like the Centurion in chapter 8, Jesus recognizes in this woman “great faith.” Verse 28: “Then Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.” Jesus makes a compassionate concession. He takes a promise that is yet for the future—the healing of the nations—and brings it to bear in the present for this woman and her daughter. And so what began as a story of seemingly narrow exclusion has quite ironically become a signal of the blessing that the Gentiles can anticipate if they will trust in Jesus. There is healing and wholeness for *all nations* through faith in *Israel’s* king.

God does not heal everybody who asks—but he can and does heal as it accords to his plan. This Gentile woman shows the kind of faith that takes God’s healing power serious. And herein we have our second application: *Pray for healing with faith that God can and does heal people according to his plan.* Pray with a humility that recognizes there is a larger plan, but pray with faith that God can and does bring healing—a foretaste and sign of the greater healing and wholeness to come in the end.

Do we believe that? We’ve seen it in this congregation, friends. The God who made us and sent his Son to save us is able to repair what darkness and disease have broken if we trust him. We see another portrait of his healing power as we keep reading in vv. 29-31.

A Big Problem and the Bigger Glory of God (15:29-31)

Jesus moves on from the Gentile territory, and so the story moves on. Verse 29: “Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down

⁵ See, e.g., the discussion in Mounce, 153; D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 356.

⁶ Mounce, 153. See also Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 599.

⁷ See Carson, 355.

there.³⁰ And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them” (15:29-30).

Just as the woman came to Jesus in desperation over her daughter, here we see how widespread the desperation and need for healing was, as crowds upon crowds bring their afflicted loved ones to Jesus. And we see the wide range of suffering and affliction they endured: “the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others.” And that last phrase is a catch all—“many others.” There is no burden or affliction outside the scope of Jesus’ care or his power to heal.

And yet it’s interesting that Matthew mentions these specific afflictions. He mentions each of them again in v. 31, and we saw several of them mentioned back in chapters 9, and 11, and will see some of them again in chapter 20.

If Jesus healed all kinds of different diseases, why does Matthew always focus on the blind, mute, and lame? Quite simply because he wants us to make a connection between the promises of Isaiah and Jesus’ ministry. Listen to Isaiah 35:3-6: “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.’ *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. . . .*” And Isaiah 29:18: “In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.”

What’s interesting is that the promises of Isaiah are about what *God* will do when he comes. And here he is, in the person of Jesus, doing it. Bringing healing. Reversing the curse of the fall as a sign and foretaste of the restoration to come. Isaiah 29 continues, “Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob: ‘Jacob shall no more be ashamed, no more shall his face grow pale. For when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name; they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel’” (29:22-23). And that’s exactly what happens in Matthew as the people of Israel see the work of their God. Matthew 15:31: Jesus he healed them, “so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.”

This is what God’s healing power is really about. His glory. His renown. His honor and worthy reputation. It’s not just about being freed from our problems so that we can get on with a normal life, or go back to the way things were before we got sick. The point is to find our satisfaction and wholeness in Christ, whatever the situation, *which is what’s best for us, and what brings the most glory to God.*

There is something far worse than the problems we face in this life—to be shut out from God’s presence and glory forever because of sin. And there is something far better than being delivered from those problems—to know and love and enjoy God forever. To find our greatest treasure and satisfaction in him. That’s something no disease, no disability, no sickness, and no power of darkness can ever take away.

And that is our ultimate hope—wholeness and satisfaction in Christ to the glory of God. It’s what Christ purchased on the cross when he bore our sin in our place. It’s what has broken into

this world through his resurrection from the dead. And it's not just the hope of the Jews, it's the hope of all nations. In Revelation 22, the apostle John has a vision of God's new creation. Verse 1: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (22:1-2). There is healing and wholeness for all nations through faith in Israel's king. And that healing is to God's glory.

So there's our third application: *Pray for healing that God might be glorified among all nations.* That we would see, and that others would see, his power and worthiness in restoring what is broken in our lives.

Pray with a humility that recognizes there is a larger plan at work. Pray with faith that God can and does bring healing according to that plan. And pray for healing that God might be glorified among all nations.