

Episode-219

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the God Questions podcast. Jeff, Kevin, and I are going to continue our series in the difficult passages in the Bible. So if you haven't seen some of the previous episodes I invite you to watch those because each episode is kind of self-contained, but how we're approaching these is very similar. So they would be helpful to watch.

Shea Houdmann

Today, we're actually going to be talking about another one that we get a ton of questions about. This is in Matthew chapter 15, verses 21 to 28. And the gist of it is that some people read this passage and it seems like Jesus is referring to the Canaanite woman as a dog. So let me go ahead and read the passage to you, and then I will try to explain it to you and help you make sense of what's actually going on in this passage.

Shea Houdmann

So again, this is Matthew chapter 15, verses 21 to 28. And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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. But he did not answer her word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, Send her away, for she is crying out after us. He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But she came and knelt before him, saying, Lord, help me. And he answered, It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. But she said, Yes, Lord. Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. Then Jesus answered her, O woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire. And her daughter was healed instantly.

Shea Houdmann

So Kevin, what's going on in this passage? Is Jesus referring to the Canaanite woman as a dog? And if so, is that meant in an insulting or disparaging way?

Kevin Stone

I would say that no, Jesus is not telling this Canaanite woman, Hey, you're a dog, and I'm not going to help you. He's not calling her a dog at all. Actually, he is using a word picture. He's using a metaphor, an illustration that she understood very readily. And in fact, she's not offended by it. She embraces it, actually.

Kevin Stone

I think that what Jesus is doing here is drawing out a greater faith from this Canaanite woman. His unresponsiveness had a purpose, and that was, I think, to have her keep asking, which she does. And then his seeming rebuffs, twice, he seems to rebuff her. And even that has a purpose, and it's not to destroy her faith. It is to develop her faith, to increase her faith.

Kevin Stone

And as we go through the story, we see that's exactly what happens. She comes to him, acknowledging that he is the Jewish Messiah. She calls him son of David. And then she calls him Lord, kneels before him, and she pleads with him, knowing that he has the power. And she ends up saying, you know, all I need is a little tiny bit of your power. A little morsel, a little crumb is all I need of your power, because you can do this so easily. And her faith was great. Her faith does develop through all of this. And I think that we can then say Jesus is testing her faith in this passage, through his unresponsiveness, and then through his two different ways that he speaks to her.

Kevin Stone

And we see this elsewhere in the Gospels, where Jesus seems to be testing people's faith. When they come to him with a profession of faith, he will challenge them sometimes. We see this in Mark 10, when the rich young ruler comes to Jesus and immediately starts off with the conversation with, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus immediately challenges him on that word good. Why do you call me good? No one is good except for God. So, Jesus here was not claiming to not be good or to not be God, but he was challenging this young man to define his terms more precisely. Did he really mean this? What was this man's definition of good? Because as it turns out, he thought he was pretty good, and Jesus had to show him that he too was a sinner.

Kevin Stone

John 5, in verse 6, Jesus comes to the paralyzed man, the lame man there at the pool, and Jesus sees him lying there, learned that he'd been in this condition for a long time, and Jesus asked him, do you want to get well? Seems like such an obvious question, but I think, again, Jesus is trying to draw out faith, challenging this man to express his faith. Do you want to get well? Do you believe that I can make you well?

Kevin Stone

And then in John chapter 8, we see this as well, where some Jews who believed in him, that's how John describes him, describes this group, they believed in Jesus on some level, and they come to Jesus, and Jesus says to them, if you continue in my word, you are my disciples indeed. So, Jesus encourages their belief, but at the same time, he gives them a warning. Is this

belief that you have simply a surface commitment, or is this something deeper? Are you going to continue in my word? Because that's where true discipleship happens.

Kevin Stone

True discipleship is not based on a flash in the pan, emotional response, you know, some kind of a moment of excitement where you got all excited about this man that you think is the Messiah, but will you continue in my word? Jesus challenges them right off the bat, and as we go through that passage there in John chapter 8, it becomes apparent that these Jews who believed in him did in fact have a very superficial understanding and a superficial faith. So, I think here in our passage with the Canaanite woman, Jesus is simply challenging her faith and causing it to grow, because it's in times of testing that our faith grows.

Jeff Laird

And he's also doing this for demonstrative reasons, just a fancy way of saying he's doing it so that other people will see it and learn from it. He doesn't necessarily need himself to test out what these other people are thinking or feeling, but he's providing an opportunity to make this example for people to be able to see. And I think with the Canaanite woman, it's also important because the ultimate resolution to this sort of turns that supposedly racist narrative on its head.

Jeff Laird

In other words, this person is a Canaanite, and the Canaanites were sometimes referred to as dogs, which in that culture was very derogatory, something unclean, something undesirable. And instead of Jesus being very dogged about saying, no, I am absolutely not under any circumstances communicating with a Canaanite, instead he winds up praising her, granting her request for what's happening. So, the example of that is important.

Jeff Laird

We also see that there's something that's a little bit lost in translation, and culture is important when we talk about what's polite, what's impolite, what's vulgar, what's not. Before we started recording, we were talking about the fact that William Shakespeare, which everybody would think of as the pinnacle of sophistication and properness and so on and so forth, sort of, but I remember seeing an online discussion where somebody made an offhanded remark about, you don't see that kind of vulgarity in Shakespeare. And it was hilarious because if you know what Shakespeare is saying, some of what Shakespeare says is actually pretty rough. But when you hear those exact same words that were used back then in a modern context, they don't have the same sense that they did then.

Jeff Laird

Well, here we have Jesus speaking one language, it's getting translated into another, and sometimes that causes issue. Short version of this is that when Jesus communicates with this woman and he makes the comment, he first makes the point that he was sent there to minister to the Jewish people, that was his purpose when he was there. So at first he's saying, this is not the demographic I'm here to work with, I have a mission. Then when he makes the comment about bread, it's not so much that he's saying what in modern English, he wouldn't be saying something like, you don't take good food and throw it to animals, with sort of a snide attitude. The word that he uses in Greek is different from the one that's usually used.

Jeff Laird

Usually in New Testament when you see references to a dog in a negative sense, it's kion. The word that he uses is a derivative of that. It's basically something that means a little one or a little animal. It's sort of the equivalent of calling somebody a doggie or a puppy or something like that. So in a sense, this would be more like him saying, I was sent to the children of Israel, and she says, no, please heal me. He says, it's not right to take food from the kids and give it to the puppies. No, it's not complimentary in a sense, but it's not meant to be overtly insulting. There's still a level of endearment that's going on with that. And she, Kevin, like you were saying, she understands it. She grasps what he's saying. She doesn't expect anything. She doesn't demand anything. She just says, you are right, Lord. I understand you are here for a certain purpose. However, even the puppies can eat the crumbs that the kids drop off the table. And that's where he responds by saying, all right, you understand, you grasp, you don't demand, but you ask. Yes. And I will do that.

Jeff Laird

So we can see that there's something in this that's sort of a translatable concern that's in there. So when we really understand what's happening, he is not looking at this woman and saying, listen, you dog, you cur, you whatever racial thing. He's making an analogy. And even within the context of the analogy, he's using terms that are different from the slurs that people would often use in other circumstances.

Jeff Laird

So in no sense whatsoever is he calling her a dog. And he's not even using a comparison where he refers to her in a way that other people would use that. He draws out her faith. He tries to get her down to demonstrate that she understands what's happening. And then he makes a point relatively gently, not nearly as coarsely as he could make it. And that's something that's

important when we look at some of these and we say, oh, that's insulting. Well, maybe not necessarily when you know what it really says.

Shea Houdmann

Excellent points. Kevin, something you said about how the Canaanite woman, she wasn't offended at what Jesus said. I think that's key here. I mean, she totally went along with this. She played right into the story. She took what Jesus said and turned it around and said, yes, but even.

Shea Houdmann

So one, I think you can verify that what Jesus was saying to her was not meant or interpreted in an offensive way based on the woman's response. And the second thing to learn from this passage is throughout the Gospels, Jesus has a way of turning things upside down in terms of Jewish and Gentile relations. Think of like the parable of the Good Samaritan where the priest walks by and doesn't do anything. The Levite walks by and doesn't do anything. But this Samaritan who were hated, I think even more than Gentiles were, walks by and he's the one who does this. And so Jesus here says, great is your faith, woman. Or when the Roman centurion says, Jesus, I don't even need you to come into my house. Just say the word, my servant will be healed. And he says, I haven't even seen such great faith in Israel.

Shea Houdmann

So here Jesus is pointing out again, great faith among the Gentiles when they didn't have all of these advantages of the Jews. They didn't understand the promises of the Messiah. They didn't understand God as well. All these advantages the Jews had and yet it's the Gentiles, it's the non-Jews that are again and again impressing Jesus with his faith. So I think that's something we need to focus on in this passage that Jesus not only heals the woman's daughter, but he compliments her on her faith demonstrated by how she reacted to what Jesus said, how she understood what Jesus was saying and agree that yes, the Messiah is ultimately sent to Israel, but even the puppies get the crumbs.

Shea Houdmann

And you can see even shadows of this in Romans 11 where Gentiles are grafted in Israel. And right now the Gentiles are receiving the blessings, but we ultimately believe God still has a plan for Israel and will fulfill his promises to Israel. So in a sense, we are the puppies who are receiving the blessings through Israel, through what Jesus did. So I think there's several really powerful things in this passage that clearly communicate, you know, Jesus is not being demeaning or assaulting, rather he's making a very powerful point.

Kevin Stone

And it's interesting that every time in the Gospels where Jesus comments on somebody's great faith, he is speaking to a Gentile. And Jesus was sent to the nation of Israel. He would later send his disciples into all the world, but his focus is the nation of Israel. And here he is in the area of Tyre and Sidon, up here in the Syrophenician area. And he runs into this Canaanite woman, and it's very interesting to compare her response to Jesus to what he normally ran into in Israel. The whole reason that Jesus was in the area of Tyre and Sidon was that he withdrew for a time from Israel because the Jewish leaders were dead set on killing him. There was a plot against him, and so he let things cool off a bit. He backs away into this other area. This Canaanite woman finds him, and her response is amazing.

Kevin Stone

Because in Israel, the Jewish leaders, Jesus would present himself to them as the Messiah. Here I am. I am the Messiah. I am the one who was sent from God, and I am here in your midst. The kingdom of God is among you. And they rejected him. They said, well, we want to see a sign. And Jesus did signs, but they'd say, we want to see another one or another one. And they always demanded. They met this with a lack of faith. But Jesus goes to the area of Tyre and Sidon, and he meets this Canaanite woman, and she comes to him understanding that he's the Messiah, son of David, she says. And then, it seemed like as he puts her faith to the test, nothing that he does that would seem to repel her works. She is adamant in her faith, and she clings to him. And the contrast, I think, is very sharp that he finds faith here, and he comments on it. This is great faith that this woman has.

Jeff Laird

I think if what Jesus was doing was being derogatory or snide in any of these circumstances, that we would see some sort of echo or effect or reference to that. And to what you were saying, we really see something that's the opposite, which is that Jesus lays this groundwork that's the disciples to understand that the message that he's bringing is for the entire world. Salvation isn't just for the people of Israel. And it took him a while to get through that. We see even Peter still struggled with some of those differences between Jews and Gentiles after Jesus was resurrected.

Jeff Laird

So I think if he had had a response that the disciples who were watching would have said, wow, that was pretty racist, not that they thought in those terms. But if they had thought of it that way, you would have seen some of that somehow come out and come across. But you don't. You actually see a continuation of the exact opposite thing. Jesus is laying the groundwork for showing that these people are all still part of the plan. And there again,

sometimes it's easy to misunderstand when we're a little bit separated from these things.

Jeff Laird

Another example of how this sort of thing would work is when Jesus is talking to his mother at the wedding at Cana. That's another one of those examples where statement is made and we read it in modern English and we think of modern sensibilities and we go, oh, that sounds rude. Because most translations, when Mary goes to Jesus and says they don't have wine, Jesus says, woman, what does that have to do with me? It's not my time.

Well, in a modern sense, when you look at a female and refer to her as a woman, at least in the West, that's typically considered to be derogatory. If you say, woman, what do you want? Well, that's not something you want. That's almost as bad as telling her to calm down, does not work, not a good idea.

Jeff Laird

But what Jesus is saying is not that modern sense. He's not looking at her and saying, woman, what do you want? He's using a term that's more respectful. It's more like him saying, ma'am or madam. So in his culture, that's the way that would have come across. So in a modern sense, Jesus was looking at his mother and saying, ma'am, I don't know what this has to do with me. It's not my time yet. So there again, if there was something in there that was rude, dismissive, I think we would have picked up on it. So when Jesus communicates with Mary, yes, when we coarsely translate something, we can misinterpret that in English. That's not the intent that was there. And there's nothing in there that makes us think that that was the way it was going. We see that in Cana. Here we see it again with the Canaanite woman. He's using a lesson. He's doing something to teach what's happening.

Jeff Laird

Now, if he really wanted to be that culturally insensitive, then why would he have accepted her request in the first place? So here's another place where the logic works. If he's going to look at the woman and just flat out call her a dog and say that his ministry is not for dogs and that's not what he's here for, then why in the world would he suddenly change his mind and say, oh, okay. Yes. Well, I'm going to do the thing that you wanted me to do. So again, here's a place where we've talked about it with other things.

If something seems kind of silly or ridiculous, then maybe it's just not a good interpretation and you need to go back. So it's totally understandable why people would read that and be sensitive to it. Even in the modern times, there are certain terms and words that when we use them around or for people, they can be misunderstood. They can be awkward. They can be insulting, but

we're not reading something that was spoken in the modern world, written down by modern people. We're reading something that was written in a different language and has to have at least a little bit of grace given to it when we're translating.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff, that point is so important. And even what you said earlier about the different words used for different animals. So for example, when Jesus later says, referring to Herod, he says, tell that fox. Well, in our current modern English, if we call someone a fox, the most common usage today would be an attractive woman. So clearly that's not what Jesus was calling Herod. I mean, if anything, a fox was a dirty, unclean, annoying animal you want to get rid of. It's similar to how they're viewed today. But so yeah, just because today calling someone a dog is an insult, and yeah, clearly elsewhere in Scripture, it doesn't mean that that's what it is in this case.

Shea Houdmann

So for me, really thinking about if Jesus really wanted to insult the woman, he would have called her a cat instead of a dog. What do you guys think of that theory since me being a dog lover? Is that a valid theory?

Kevin Stone

I'm with you on that one, Shay.

Jeff Laird

I don't disagree, but I think that's also a modern thing. I think the ancient backwards people were unfortunately obsessed with cats. And I don't think they fully grasped the enormity of what cats are. So we're going to get hate mail for that, you know.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah. Every time I do the do pets go to heaven question and say, dogs go to heaven, cats don't, I'm like, MeLissa seriously rolls her eyes. I can hear it even if she's not in the room with me.

Jeff Laird

People don't like truth. But I understand why there's sensitivity around some of these things, because like you're saying, we use animal references in culture when we talk about people in negative ways. Like the infamous instinctive slur that people use against women as a reference to a female dog. Anytime that you say something that implies that a person is something other than human, it's a sensitive thing. So I understand why from a modern perspective, you would read that. And when Jesus makes an analogy where he puts this woman in the place of an animal that people would look at and go, Ooh, I don't like that. I don't understand that. There again, when you understand the

analogy and what he's really saying, he's not calling her that. He's just using an analogy.

Shea Houdmann

To me, the biggest stand out and switching back to being serious in this passage is the inclusion of Gentiles in God's plan. Even here in Matthew, which I believe is the only gospel that actually records this specific story. And Matthew is the gospel that's most written to the Jews. This presents Jesus, extra emphasis on Jesus being the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah. He's the Savior of Israel. He's the King of Israel.

Shea Houdmann

And yet here, as in other places, Jesus is emphasizing the faith of a Gentile. So what some people read and think he's being insulting towards a woman. It's like, no, the opposite. He is being extremely complimentary towards a woman, towards a woman who would have been looked down upon for multiple reasons in that culture. And he's saying that she has a great faith and then he does exactly as she requests. So I think a powerful lesson to learn from this is that everyone is included in God's plan.

Shea Houdmann

Yes, Israel does have a special place in God's plan, but that doesn't mean other people are outside of God's will, outside of God's love. God said he's not willing for anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance. All means all. When Jesus says, for God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son, the world means the world, all of us. So Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, we are all called to salvation. We are all drawn to faith in the sense of God desires all of us to come to repentance.

Shea Houdmann

As anything, that's something that stood out to me as I studied this passage, is the inclusion of a Gentile woman, a Canaanite even, probably the lowest of the different Gentile classes to this would have been a Canaanite, and yet here Jesus not only compliments her faith, but then does exactly what she asks. I think that's a powerful reminder to us.

Kevin Stone

Just to piggyback on that, yes, this Gentile woman had everything against her, I mean, she was a Gentile, and so she was not part of the covenant promises of Israel. She was a woman, and rabbis did not give women the time of day back then. There was no interaction, usually, between a Jewish rabbi and a woman. The disciples seemed to be against her. They seemed to be very impatient with her, you know, send her away. Even if we interpret that as

meaning go ahead and heal her daughter and send her away, they still wanted to be rid of her.

Kevin Stone

And even some of what Jesus says seemed to be against her, but she keeps on asking, she keeps on seeking, she keeps on knocking, because that's what faith does. Faith perseveres. She did exactly what Jesus wanted her to do, and that was to show her faith to be strong, and then he comments on that. After working with her so patiently, in opposition to what the disciples wanted, Jesus was so patient with her, and he shows his compassion, and then he heals her daughter, and then comments on that great faith that he had developed himself and drawn out of her.

Shea Houdmann

Amen. This is an interesting passage in that you can get a lot of questions about it, as I said at the beginning. Just some people reading it in a modern sense, interpreting or inserting insult where none is intended. And Kevin, I think as you said at first, the fact how the woman responds, I think is a powerful picture of it was not intended nor interpreted as an insult, so therefore we should not interpret it that way either.

Shea Houdmann

So I hope our conversation today has been helpful to you. I understand the passage a little bit better here in Matthew 15, 21, and 28. No, Jesus did not call the Canaanite woman a dog, and even if he had, it would not have been in an insulting sense as our modern interpretation would possibly lead us towards. So I hope this episode's been interesting, educational, and edifying to you. Tune in next time for the next episode in our series of difficult passages in the Bible. Jeff, Kevin, thank you for joining me as always. Got questions? The Bible has answers, and we'll help you find them.