



Valuing Crumbs by Dr. David Crabtree

A Canaanite woman from [Phoenicia] came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

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

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

—Matthew 15:21-28

I don't know why Jesus was in Phoenicia. According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had spent the early part of his ministry traveling around Galilee teaching whomever came to hear what he had to say. He had attracted a handful of individuals (his disciples) with whom he worked very intensively, imparting to them his wisdom with respect to who God is and what He is up to. Jesus had traveled from city to city within Galilee, disciples in tow, teaching the crowds. On a number of occasions, he accompanied his teaching with miraculous healings, sometimes in isolation and sometimes in large numbers, and this attracted crowds to him.

Phoenicia was right next to Galilee, so it was not a long trip. And we know that

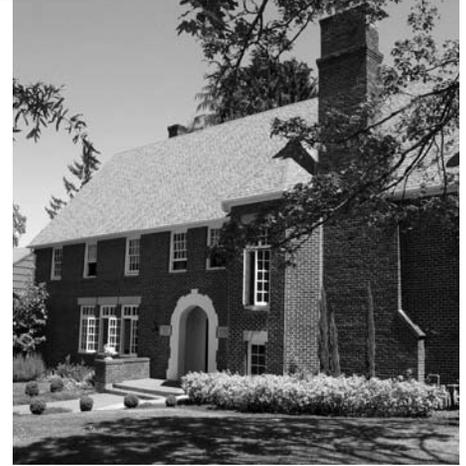
Jesus traveled to many places in the vicinity of Judea and Galilee over the course of his life. We know he made numerous trips to Jerusalem and went to the Jordan valley and Caesarea Philippi, among other places. He may have gone to Phoenicia as a tourist, to see the sights.

Or Jesus may have gone there just to take a break from the crush of the crowd. Jesus clearly found it draining to be constantly surrounded by people. On several occasions, he withdrew to a place of solitude for the specific reason of getting away from the multitudes. His trip to Phoenicia may have been a more extended trip in search of an escape from the demands of his ministry.

And sometimes Jesus left one political jurisdiction and went to another in order to escape difficult political pressures. Matthew says that Jesus "withdrew" to Phoenicia, and he seems to use the verb to describe situations when Jesus is escaping the plotting of religious or political officials.

For whatever reason, Jesus was in Phoenicia. Undoubtedly, some Jews were living in that area. There was some trade between Galilee and the cities and ports of Phoenicia, but the population was overwhelmingly gentile. The people inhabiting this region were the descendants of the people who had lived in the Promised Land when the Israelites arrived from Egypt to possess the land, the ones the Israelites were told to eliminate.

It is somewhat surprising that the Phoenician woman who came to Jesus had any idea who he was. Presumably she had heard something about this remarkable man. The teaching and miracles Jesus did in Galilee must have generated enough of a buzz that



news leaked across the boarder into gentile territory. To most gentiles such news was probably just slightly curious. They had no messianic expectation, they were not devoted to the Mosaic law, and they shared none of the cultural background into which Jesus was speaking. For most of them, the stories of Jesus and his activities were probably nothing more than entertaining rumors. But we know that all across the Roman Empire, some gentiles showed significant interest in Judaism. Roman culture had degenerated into a moral wasteland, having completely lost touch with the moral values that must undergird human society and give it order. In this environment, Judaism stood out as a welcome locus of sanity. Judaism kept alive a vital sense of morality that many found refreshing.

Gentiles who wanted to understand the basis for this moral vision began to attend synagogues to hear the teaching. These gentiles became very well informed with respect to the Jewish Scripture. They were often referred to as "God-fearers." Matthew does not identify the Canaanite woman as a God-fearer, but she seems to be well-informed with respect to Jewish culture. She called out to Jesus using the term "Son of David," a term which only made sense in the context of Jewish culture. God had promised King David that one of his descendants would rule over Israel forever. As became apparent in subsequent revelation, this ruler would rule in perfect justice and righteousness—he would be God's right hand man—and so Jewish culture looked forward to this person's arrival. This Son of David,



Valuing Crumbs, cont.

also known as the Messiah, would usher in an era of worldwide peace and well-being. Interestingly, the time in which Jesus lived was a time of high messianic expectation. Many Jews thought that all of the signs pointed to the likelihood that the Messiah would come at any minute.

The woman may or may not have been a God-fearer, but her use of the title “Son of David” was significant. Very few people apply this title to Jesus in the book of Matthew. It takes quite a while for even the disciples to recognize the appropriateness of this title for Jesus. Given Jesus’ response to the woman, I think we have to assume that her use of the title was not frivolous or gratuitous. She seemed genuinely to believe that Jesus was the descendant of David predicted by the prophets. That is why she had come to appeal to Jesus as he walked through her vicinity.

Her appeal concerned her daughter who was demon-possessed. The text does not indicate how this malady manifested itself in her daughter. We do know that when the demon was cast out, the daughter is described as “healthy,” and so the demon could have been the cause of some health abnormality. The woman had probably observed her daughter suffer from the effects of the demon over an extended period of time and was elated to hear that the miracle worker from Galilee had come to Phoenicia.

Nothing is particularly remarkable about such a woman asking Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. She was probably desperate, and all she needed to motivate her to seek his help was a slight chance that this miracle worker might be able to help her. There is no indication, however, that any of her neighbors brought their sick to be healed by Jesus as people did in Galilee. There they came from all around, carrying their sick relatives and friends to see if Jesus would heal them, and he healed many. The same activity does not appear to have happened in Phoenicia. Either the rumors about Jesus were not as widespread, or if people had heard the rumors, they doubted them or didn’t think a Jew would heal a gentile. But the Canaanite woman obviously thought there was a chance that Jesus would heal her daughter.

Jesus’ response to her was not at all encouraging. He didn’t answer her at all, which was not typical for Jesus. In almost all other instances, we see Jesus empathizing with those suffering and extending his help. The woman was not easily discouraged, however. She persisted in her appeals to Jesus for help—to the point where the disciples decided that she was too much of a distraction. Wanting to be rid of her, they said to Jesus, “Send her away.” The flow of the narrative suggests they were saying, “Do for her what she wants so she will leave,” but Jesus declined. He explained to his disciples that he was sent only to the sheep of Israel. By this he apparently meant that his miracles were not primarily acts of kindness, although they were that, but that they had another, more important, purpose. They were evidence that he was sent by God and was someone people needed to listen to. The miracles were the credentials for his teaching, his ministry, and his ministry was to the Jews and not to the gentiles. Therefore to perform a miracle in Phoenicia would be to no good purpose.

Rather than being dissuaded by Jesus’ response, however, the woman redoubled her efforts to persuade Jesus to heal her daughter. She bowed down to Jesus and begged him to help her. At this point, Jesus responded to her directly for the first time. Characteristically, his response was a parable. He said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” This parable was intended to capture the concept that was already present in Jesus’ response to the disciples: Jesus had been sent by God to minister to the Jews. He was sent to represent God in word and deed to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Since this is what he had been sent to do, it made no sense for him to waste his time and effort ministering to gentiles.

As this point, the woman could have responded in several ways, ranging from giving up to asserting her right to Jesus’ help. But the form that her response took is quite remarkable. She took Jesus’ parable and built on it, saying “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” In the parable, all of the father’s attention is focused on his sons, which is entirely appropriate, and the woman did not challenge this. The father fulfills his responsibility as father by giving the food to his sons. But in

that scenario, there is still a place for even the dogs to get food. When food is given to children, some food quite naturally spills on the floor. No one intends this, but it happens. The dogs are the unintended beneficiaries of such a reality. They lap up whatever little bits fall on the floor. The woman’s response was remarkable because she recognized that Jesus coming to minister to the Jews was good and proper, and she did not want to interfere with that. But while Jesus was ministering to the Jews, gentiles could nevertheless benefit—without distracting Jesus one bit from his primary mission.

The woman’s knowledge of the God of the Jews probably encouraged her to expect help. The Old Testament indicates that God is a compassionate God, and He is not only willing but even eager to extend that compassion to gentiles. As God’s representative, Jesus certainly would share that compassion and that desire to extend it to gentiles. The woman was counting on that.

The woman could have taken offense that Jesus was only interested in Jews, but she exhibited considerable humility in her response. She did not insist on her equal right to Jesus’ attention; rather she took her rightful place as a spectator to Jesus’ ministry to the Jews. She merely recognized an opportunity to benefit directly from his ministry without interfering with it.

Jesus recognized how unusual the woman’s response was. He said to her, “Your faith is great!” Jesus rarely made such a proclamation. More frequently he bemoaned the littleness of the disciples’ faith, and so his proclamation stands out. The woman manifested her faith by being content with God relegating her to a second-class status with respect to the process of making His purposes known. Rather than being offended or angry that Jesus was cold-hearted or chauvinistic, she accepted Jesus’ ministry as an appropriate way for God to reveal His truth to mankind. Nevertheless, she persisted in her request. Whether she was asking that Jesus make an exception or that Jesus recognize that casting the demon out of her daughter was in keeping with his ministry to the Jews is not clear. In either case, however, her humility is striking. The woman’s willingness to accept even second-class status with respect to God’s purposes is exemplary.

The Canaanite woman, a gentile, grasped a very important concept. For reasons fully known to God alone, God decided to select one people group from all the people on the earth to be His special people. God has related to that group of people—the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—more directly than any other people group. God had Moses lead them out of Egypt and sent plagues to force the pharaoh to let them go. He appeared to the Israelites in the desert and gave them the law at Mount Sinai. God led them through the wilderness in the form of a cloud and a pillar of fire. He provided for them with manna and quail. He helped them conquer the Promised Land, sometimes in miraculous ways like at Jericho. Once Israel was established as a kingdom, God spoke to his people through his prophets, and their words were put into writing to be a continuing witness to God’s proclamations and actions. And the ultimate revelation of God, Jesus Christ, the translation of God into human flesh, was born a Jew and sent to minister to the Jews.

No other people group can claim this kind of relationship to God. From the time of Abraham to the present, God has been intimately involved in the history of the Jewish nation, and it is in the context of this relationship between God and his chosen people that God has made himself known to human beings. So if one were to step back and look at the sweep of human history from God’s perspective, it would be centered on the Jews. Gentiles occupy a back seat in this respect. As people groups, gentiles are less significant. That is a bitter truth with which gentiles must come to terms.

One could look at the history of mankind since the time of Jesus and conclude that Israel slipped into historical insignificance. Many momentous events, including several major wars, have occurred since then, and most of those events had little or nothing to do with Israel. (From the time of World War II to the present, this has changed somewhat.) But while these events are significant with respect to world history, they do not occupy a central position in the record of God’s process of revealing who He is to mankind. Rather, the combination of historic events and God’s commentary on those events form the core of revelatory history. God’s commentary on history, found primarily in the Bible, is

almost exclusively devoted to the people of Israel. This is also true of events prophesied with respect to the end. So then, history as a description of God’s revelation of himself to mankind always has been and always will be primarily focused on Israel.

This does not mean, however, that God is indifferent to gentiles. Even though the Bible is a very Israel-centered book, numerous passages make clear God’s interest and compassion toward all people. As individuals, God is keenly interested in all of us. However, it is simply the case that He has elected to reveal himself primarily through one nation. But He reveals Himself for the benefit of all mankind.

So we all are greatly indebted to Israel for the role that it has played and continues to play. God’s focus on Israel has meant that Israel has had a difficult history. Israel has experienced the discipline of God to a greater extent because of this focus. It is easy to understand Tevye’s line in *Fiddler on the Roof* when he says to God, “Your chosen people. But once in a while can’t you choose someone else?” But every human being stands to gain from the special relationship between God and Israel.

One could look at the troubled history of the Jews and conclude that their God is either incompetent or has turned against

them. The prophet Isaiah deals with this issue, but Isaiah assures us that God is neither incompetent, nor has He turned against the Jews. Their history is troubled because God is disciplining them and preparing them for an especially glorious future.

Like the Canaanite woman, I am a gentile. Having done a lot of genealogical research, I have discovered that my ancestors on both sides are almost exclusively Northern European, and I have found no Jewish blood. The designation of “gentile” is therefore as appropriate for me as anyone. As a gentile, my job is to be an attentive and empathetic spectator of the relationship between God and Israel. In light of Scripture’s commentary, that relationship, both past and present, is critical to understanding what God is doing. I have much to learn from that interaction. And if I value what God values, I can be neither indifferent nor hostile toward God’s chosen people. What I stand to gain is crumbs. But if I understand what is going on and my place within it, I will cherish every crumb.

Dr. David Crabtree is the president and a tutor at Gutenberg College, and he is a co-author of *The Language of God: A Commonsense Approach to Understanding and Applying the Bible*.



Gutenberg Music Seminar: Tutor Ron Julian leads the junior/senior music seminar, which provides a general introduction to music theory, history, appreciation, and practice. The goal is to give students a broad overview that will prepare them to listen to music more knowledgeably and to understand better the role of music in Western cultural history.

Please be praying...

1) Having the right mix of students is critical to Gutenberg's ongoing success. We desire students who will come to desire God and truth more deeply. Please pray about the upcoming freshman class until the day they arrive!

2) At this year's Summer Institute (August 3-7), we will be grappling, along with invited Messianic friends, with how the writers of the New(er) Testament viewed and used the Jewish Scriptures in their own thought and writings. It

should be very interesting. Please pray for a good turnout and for great dialogue on the subject.

3) Lots of personnel changes are going on right now. Please pray for the right support staff, particularly new house managers, to support and facilitate the goals and mission of Gutenberg College.

4) Please pray for the tutors at Gutenberg and for their role in the lives of the students and, through their recorded and distributed teaching, in the lives of people around the world.

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Cost: \$70 per person (includes lunch and morning and afternoon snacks).

To register: Call or email Gutenberg College.

Details & Info: www.gutenberg.edu

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Gutenberg tutor **Tim McIntosh** will speak at the Circe Institute's regional conference in Seattle on **May 8-9**. The conference is titled

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