

Women in the Gospels

Seeing Jesus from their perspective.

October 8, 2024

The Syrophoenician Woman and the Mother of James and John

The Faith of a Canaanite Woman

Both Matthew and Mark record this story of a Canaanite woman who asks Jesus for help. Just prior to her request, Jesus is in Galilee with his many disciples.

Mark 7:1 – 9, 14 – 15, 20 - 23

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus ² and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

⁶ He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’

⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

⁹ And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!

¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

²⁰ He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

Jesus says they have set aside the commands of God and replaced them with their own rules and regulations.

Matthew 23: 1- 4

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

It is legalism—and it has always been true that people would rather have rules and regulations than to live by faith. Why?

Matthew 15:21 – 28

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”

²³ 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.”

²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

²⁷ "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

²⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

Mark 7:24 – 30

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

²⁸ "Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

²⁹ Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

This woman is a Greek born in Syrian Phoenicia, hence known as the Syrophoenician woman. Matthew labels her a Canaanite woman. Has this woman converted to Judaism? What right does she have to invade the private resting place of this man and beg him to heal her daughter? She was desperate. Where else can she go?

Jews would sometimes refer to Gentiles as dogs. So, Jesus' response is definitely strong and off-putting. Why do you think he did that?

This woman was quick—her answer is ingenious. Afterwards, Jesus declared that she had great faith and he did what she wanted him to do.

Do you think she changed Jesus' mind? Was he really going to refuse to heal her daughter, and then her response caused him to change his mind?

Where do you go first when you are troubled, fearful, uncertain, desperate?

The Mother of James and John

Now let's consider the second nameless woman, the mother of James and John. So, first, who were James and John? They were brothers who were chosen by Jesus to be his disciples, part of the in-group, the Twelve:

Matthew 4:21 – 22:

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Was their mother also a disciple of Jesus?

Do you ever want to be the greatest? What dream did you have about being the greatest?

Jesus kept trying to explain to his disciples how they can be great.

Matthew 18:1 – 4:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Note that they actually asked Jesus who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. So, it seems that all

of them are beginning to think about what's going to happen when Jesus establishes his kingdom on earth. They want to know who Jesus will choose for the top jobs. But as we look at the story of the Mother of James and John, we see clearly that Jesus' message has not gotten through.

By the way, note that even Jesus couldn't get through to these disciples. Why not?

Matthew 20:17 - 23

Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, ¹⁸ "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"

²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

²¹ "What is it you want?" he asked.

She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

²² "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered.

²³ Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

Did you ever have a child who did not have "ears to hear"? What was that like?

How often do you and I not have "ears to hear" what God is saying to us?

Do you read the Bible, and if you do, do you expect to hear from God when you read it?

So, Mom is doing some strategic planning—what will happen when Jesus takes over? He'll need a cabinet; he'll need lots of people in very important spots, and since James and John have been with him from the beginning, it just makes sense to her that he will choose the best-looking young men from his very close associates—the Twelve—to take the highest positions in his government. Mom is thinking ahead; I would probably have done the same thing.

Notice her timing: After Jesus has again told the disciples this amazing truth, that he will be mocked and flogged and crucified, and then he will be raised to life, THEN this mother comes to Jesus. Even in the midst of this horrifying prediction, these disciples and this mother are still thinking "what's in it for me?"

Jesus asked what they want, and Mom answers: "*Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.*" Jesus advises them that they don't know what they're asking for, and asks if they can drink the cup he is going to drink?

What cup is that? In the Old Testament the cup of God represented God's judgment against sin. It's a terrible cup; no one would want this cup. Even Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that if it was possible, "take this cup from me."

But only Jesus could drink from this cup of God's wrath and take our sins on himself, so that you and I won't ever have to drink of this cup.

What did Jesus mean when he said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

Think of what Jesus said at the Last Supper:

Matthew 26:27 – 28:

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus gave the disciples a cup of wine which they drank in remembrance of the cup of his blood. Every time we partake of communion, we take that same cup—not actual blood—but in remembrance of this truth that we don't have to drink the cup of God's wrath because Jesus has given us the cup of his blood of the covenant. That new covenant that declares we have been forgiven and our sins will be remembered against us no more.

Basically, Jesus told this mother and her two sons that he could not grant their wish to have those places of prominence in his kingdom. But that's not the end of the story.

Matthew 20:24 - 28

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Once again Jesus bursts all their bubbles; he debunks all their preconceived ideas of what it meant to be his disciple. Jesus calls them together and explains that everything is different in his kingdom. If they wanted to be great in his kingdom, they must be servants or a slave.

Jesus said these powerful words to his apostles (and by the power of God's Spirit, to us), "*Not so with you.*" We are not to be like the world! We are not to seek power, prestige, and influence.

And what about the mother of James and John? How do you think she felt at the rebuke of what Jesus told her and her sons.

Closing/Take Away

So, what do you take away from tonight's lesson on these two women?

Syrophoenician woman: _____

Mother of James and John: _____

References are from the book, *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women* by Rebecca McLaughlin