

JESUS HEALS THE DAUGHTER OF THE CANAANITE WOMAN

Matthew 15:21-28

By Archpriest Peter Olsen

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Jesus saw His mission first of all as directed to the Jews. To the disciples He said, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:5-6). This did not mean that Jesus did not plan to extend His ministry to the Gentiles as well. The Jews were God's chosen people who kept the faith in one God, and through whom God had hoped to bring mankind to salvation.

Nonetheless, Jesus followed a proper order in the fulfillment of His ministry. It was necessary to first announce the advent of Christ, the messiah, to the Jews. Otherwise they would have an excuse not to follow Him, claiming that they had rejected the Lord because He sent the apostles to the Gentiles and the Samaritans....For example, in St. Mark's Gospel, Jesus first feeds five thousand Jews with five loaves of bread (Mk. 6:30-44), then later on He feeds four thousand Gentiles with seven loaves of bread (Mk. 8:1-9). The mission to the Gentiles did not really become a priority until after the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, and even then not immediately. The Apostles, for the most part continued to direct their mission to the Jews; however, they quickly realized that the mission among the Jews had no future. It was under the influence of Paul that the apostolic community accepted the final decision during the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-29) to open the doors of the Church to the pagans, that circumcision was not required, and adherence to the law of Moses was not necessary for salvation. Actually, Jesus prepared the apostles for this by His many teachings, where He proclaims that those who reject His invitation to the heavenly banquet and are unworthy will be replaced by others, everyone, even those who were considered outcasts by the Jews — everyone who has faith, believes in Him, and responds to His calling.

Today a Gentile woman, having heard about the Lord and His power of healing, approaches Him with great humility and faith. She bows down to the ground before Him and begs Him to heal her daughter who is lying at home possessed by a demon. At first Jesus ignores her, and then he makes a remark which seems to be very rude and out of character: "It is not lawful to take the children's bread and to throw it to the dogs." This statement must be understood within the context of how the Jews viewed themselves and the pagans who surrounded them. Pagans were considered to be not only people of a lesser sort; they were impure, no better than dogs. Jesus is imitating the hypocrisy of the Jews in order to rebuke them and teach them a lesson. The Lord was constantly attacking their pride in His preaching, underlining that *what saves a person is faith, not being a member of God's chosen nation*. The woman is not deterred by the rude words of our Savior. Her rejoinder is that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. This Gentile pagan woman exhibits a supreme example of faith and humility, and it is by this that a person is saved. Jesus puts the final stamp on this universal lesson when He proclaims, "O woman, great is your faith!" and then heals her daughter.

In Matthew's Gospel, the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter follows an episode in which the disciples of Jesus eat with unwashed hands, which leads to an argument between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus explains that impurity is not an external matter, but an internal one. It is not what enters a person's mouth that defiles him, but that which comes out of his mouth and heart — that is, evil words and thoughts, and evil actions (Mt. 15:1-20). The crux of the problem with the Pharisees is that they put their faith in externals and in ritual practices and neglected the weightier matters of the Law, that which is internal and of the heart.

St. John of Kronstadt said, "Pray with firm faith, not permitting any doubt, but at the same time, rely entirely on God's will: if what you ask is of use for you [for your salvation] — the Lord will grant it, according to your faith." Don't despair if your request is not fulfilled, — this means

that God has something else in mind. The Lord said, “My paths — are not your paths, and My thoughts, — are not your thoughts, but as far as heaven is from the earth, so are my paths as far from your paths, and My thoughts from your thoughts.” Surrender to God’s will, and then with firm faith ask, and you will receive according to your faith! Amen!

